

STREET VENDORS: MEETING THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE
OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH THROUGH GATHERINGS OF FRIENDS

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry

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May 2010

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words cannot express my gratitude to so many people who helped give birth to this process. To my Gathering Group Leaders, my project's success depended completely on your willingness to share yourself with others, and you gave so generously. Thank you. To my Lay Advisory Committee members, your wisdom, insight, excitement, and encouragement gave shape and life to the project. Thank you for your time and understanding, so freely shared. To my DMin cohort, you shared this journey with me, encouraging me step by step. Thanks for the laughs and the companionship, a gift whose value you will never fully know. My congregation allowed me the time and creative space to design, implement, and record my project. Thank you for that gift. To my family: my husband, Bo, my children, Joy and Eli, and my foster children, Nicole and Elijah, your support carried me through the trials and dry spells and helped me cross the finish line with style. Thank you for your love and grace throughout this effort. Finally, to God, the ultimate Seeker and the One who Finds, thank you for loving me as your daughter and allowing me the privilege of being your co-creator. My heart overflows with love for each of you.

ABSTRACT

STREET VENDORS: MEETING THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH THROUGH GATHERINGS OF FRIENDS

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As a pastor, I often find that in social gatherings whenever people discover my vocation, their whole demeanor changes. Some use that encounter for free advice; others confess their darkest secrets; and still others simply clam up in awkward silence. Recently, however, I sense a shift in the way people respond. Now, a typical response involves a profession of sorts: “I am spiritual but not religious.”

As a leader in the “religious” side of that equation, I wonder why people feel the need to make the distinction. What message do these people want me to hear? As a person who considers herself “spiritual,” I also wonder what we in the church can do to meet the spiritual needs of people outside of the church. I wonder if they would be open to relationships with Jesus-followers in a gathering to dialogue about spiritual issues. Could we build enough trust through those relationships to begin to hear the deeper stories and maybe uncover some of the wounds of those “non-religious” people? Why does the church, which supposedly offers Living Water to people, seem so spiritually dry to those outside? I wonder how we can learn to be church, to live church, in a way that nourishes these hungry souls.

To listen more deeply and explore these questions, my Lay Advisory Committee and I designed Gathering Groups, places where people could build relationships with

those outside the church and simply listen to their spiritual journeys. Through experiential “practice” Gatherings, I trained Group Leaders in the process of facilitating conversation and we brainstormed ways to get the conversations started. Then, the Leaders took it to the streets, recruiting participants and designing Gathering Groups in line with their gifts and personalities. We ran the Groups for six to eight weeks and met again to process what we had learned.

In the process we discovered that people longed to have a safe, non-judgmental place to share their spiritual journeys. The story-telling of these journeys became the basis for trust and relationship building in the Groups. However, many stories shared a common theme of being hurt by church, and the Leaders’ listening presence offered a healing balm for those wounds. After experiencing the ministry of listening, the participants asked the Leaders’ to share their own spiritual journey, and so the Groups became a type of “Listening Evangelism.” The Groups did not become a “stepping stone” into church, and we realized that we need new language to talk about church because of so many emotions and assumptions attached to it. The Leaders learned that they could “be” church, offering the presence of Jesus Christ, simply by listening, asking questions, and providing a safe haven for these kinds of spiritual conversations.

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CHAPTER 1

A FAMINE IN THE LAND

As I sat down at the table at Bob Evan's Restaurant, a woman participating in one of my project's Gathering Groups immediately fired a question at me: "Why are you doing this project?" she wanted to know. My Lay Advisory Committee (LAC) and I had designed these group opportunities for people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious to meet for six to eight weeks for open-ended dialogue. This group had completed their eight week session and asked me to attend so that they could share some of their experiences with me. I had come prepared, then, to listen, not to answer questions. But, the question hung in the air waiting for an answer.

I replied with a story I had heard from India. Five blind people stood around a large object trying to determine its identity. One person said that it must be a broom, for it swished about, chasing flies away. Another described it as an immovable pole, large and round. A third person stated that it must be living, for it moved in the rhythmic pattern of breathing. A fourth claimed to feel a snake, a moving round object that they could fit their hands around. A fifth person portrayed it as smooth and round and solid and pointed at one end. Alone, each of these people had a limited understanding of the object, but together they discovered an elephant.

For me, this story serves as a metaphor for God as a huge, mysterious, indescribable entity, who cannot be defined by one person alone. We each experience God in different ways and we need each other to gain a broader appreciation of the

fullness of God. Although the fullness of God dwelled in the person of Jesus Christ,¹ we do not have Jesus with us physically now. Instead, we see Jesus in each other, especially as we share our stories and our spiritual journeys with one another. Therefore, I told her, I hoped this project would provide an opportunity for us to deepen our knowledge of and relationship with God, provide a safe place where people could share and continue to explore their spiritual stories and longings, and become a community where people experience the presence of Jesus.

My answer seemed to satisfy her curiosity and we moved into conversation about what they had experienced during the previous eight weeks. One person shared that she felt a little skeptical at first because a church sponsored the Gatherings. She felt that there must be some hidden agenda, then, where people might try to convince her to see things “their” way. Instead, however, she discovered an openness and acceptance to different experiences of God and an appreciation for those individual differences. In the process, she realized how much she enjoyed talking with others about spirituality and how these conversations provided her with spiritual strength. Without intending to, this woman proved my analogy about the elephant, and expressed joy in expanding her own understanding of God.

The conversation that morning highlighted several themes common to all of our Gathering Groups. People long to talk about their spiritual lives in a safe, non-judgmental place. Although a little skeptical of possible ulterior motives for the groups, once the dialogue began to emerge participants experienced a sense of validation for their own spiritual journeys and found hope that others would not condemn them. During the

¹ See Colossians 1:19.

sessions, they felt love, acceptance, and a sense of belonging, which they attributed to the atmosphere created by the leaders. While they expressed gratitude for having such a safe haven to explore spiritual topics, they did not perceive the church to offer a similar refuge.

As I reflected on these attitudes and the stories and readings that follow, I have come to realize that a severe famine has struck the homeland of our church. People hungering for authentic spirituality have given up finding any living fruit of the Spirit to refresh them. We have not become wine; we have simply rotted, and people smell the decay and run the other direction. Instead of offering the Bread of Life, we offer the sting of judgment, and we seem surprised when people avoid the feast. Yet their hunger does not abate; they simply look elsewhere for nourishment. Let's listen to their stories.

Ron and Dana, a couple in their late 30's, long to know there is more to life than paying bills and raising children. Ron grew up atheist and his scientific approach questions blind obedience to the mandates of Scripture. Yet, he loves the stories of Jesus. Although not really interested in church, he remains open to Christianity and a lived spirituality where he can make a difference in this world. Dana grew up a conservative Christian and has grown tired of what she perceives as "the judgmental religious right and the passionless religious left."² She longs for a faith that makes a difference in her everyday life and a place where she can make a difference. She has started a foundation for a friend who needs a kidney transplant. The two of them frequently look for ways to "give back to the community." However, they do not perceive that the church can offer any of what they need.

² I have changed the names of my friends to protect their identity.

Others agree that church does not have anything that they need. The church seems to them a rule-bound organization that discriminates and makes judgments against others. Jessica, a 20-something, describes the sense of judgment from church: “I don’t believe that God or Jesus discriminate against anyone and I believe that the church does discriminate.”³ In addition, the church also seems to be more interested in rules than in relationships, and in outward appearances rather than in living authentic lives.

This attitude of “only appearances matter” gives the church its reputation for hypocrisy, another word we hear frequently in our conversations. These accusations sting yet I long to understand the experiences that give rise to them. Dan Kimball in his book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, invites pastors to leave the church and listen with love to what people outside the church are saying. He describes the hope that eventually comes when we truly listen: “As you read this book, you might get defensive at first, perhaps even a little depressed. But after listening to the people I interviewed, I experienced hope.”⁴

The hope I have found comes from the openness to spirituality and even Jesus and the desire people have to live their spirituality instead of limiting it to a set of beliefs. Lisa expresses this negatively as she describes spirituality as not: “attaching false meaning or living for some sort of reward in the afterlife.”⁵ Jay, a 23 year old, describes this desire more positively: “I do not practice spirituality besides my behavior—caring

³ Jessica, not her real name, attended a class taught by Barbara Pope.

⁴ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 20.

⁵ Lisa, again not her real name, spoke with Doug Roof.

for others.”⁶ For these young people, organized religion does not offer them a way to live their lives for others.

Surprisingly, though, even with the hostility toward organized religion, an overwhelming majority of people we heard from would consider participating in a gathering at a friend’s home to talk about spirituality. Some people expressed a little doubt as to the motive behind such a gathering. Alex said he “would want to know it was not an evangelical effort to ‘convert’ me to something.”⁷ His wife, Lisa, added that she would participate if she were allowed to “outwardly question/argue...their ‘religion’ if I see fit.”⁸ Many simply said they would be interested and would attend. Louise went so far as to say that “more people her age would pursue [spirituality] ... if they had some sort of direction or guidance.”⁹

The stories we heard confirm that there is a famine in the land: a famine of trust in the church to make any difference in people’s lives. However, we also heard the hungering for something more, for a lived faith that connects people with each other and with the world around them. How could we feed that hunger with the Bread of Life and the Living Water?

Readings both from my doctoral classes and professional library offered possibilities and hope for feeding that spiritual hunger and they provoked my interest and stirred my spirit to listen for these narratives. Instead of offering a “defense” of the

⁶ Jay also attended Barbara Pope’s class.

⁷ Alex, not his real name, talked with Doug Roof.

⁸ Lisa, mentioned above, spoke with Doug Roof.

⁹ Louise spoke with Duncan Outslay.

church and condemnation of society, these readings invited me to take a second look. As they described people who felt “turned off” by religion and Christianity, they invited the church to learn to listen to the needs of people “outside” the church. One essential need arose frequently, the need to belong, and these authors suggested that relationship lay at the heart of both Christianity and the church’s interaction with the world.

One author, Shane Claiborne, described the current state of the church’s interaction with the world through a story of producing a “man-on-the-street” video for his worship service. He approached various people and asked them to give the first word that came to their minds in response to a word he spoke. He used several words, such as “snow,” and “eagles,” and “teenagers,” then finally, “Christian.” He wrote: “When people heard the word Christian, they stopped in their tracks. I will never forget their responses: ‘fake,’ ‘hypocrite,’ ‘church,’ ‘boring.’ ...I will also never forget what they didn’t say. Not one of the people we asked that day said ‘love.’ No one said ‘grace.’ No one said ‘community.’”¹⁰ Instead of rejecting them, however, Claiborne explored possible reasons for their rejection. He posited that maybe the church offers life after death when people really want to know if there can be life before death.¹¹ His work invited me to think about what our congregation offers to people outside the church.

Another author, Dan Kimball, agreed that people outside the church do not see a pretty picture, and wrote that if he did not have Christian friends who earnestly attempted

¹⁰ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 269-270.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

to follow Christ, he also would judge Christians harshly.¹² Kimball spent a great deal of time listening to those outside the church and analyzing their critiques, which include issues such as the way the church treats homosexuals and women and viewing the church as judgmental and arrogant with a political agenda. He commented: “Maybe we in the church have been doing so much talking that we haven’t really listened. Shouldn’t we hear their thoughts, hear their hearts? Shouldn’t we listen to why they believe what they believe, instead of jumping in to try to make them believe what we believe?”¹³ His witness challenged me to seek and to create opportunities for myself and my congregation to spend some time just listening to people outside the church.

This spiritual exercise of listening would benefit both those outside and those inside the church. Jim Walker, in his book, *Dirty Word: The Vulgar, Offensive Language of the Kingdom of God*, claimed that we in the church need to see as much as people outside the church need to be seen. He suggested that the church create venues where listening can happen, going where people live so that we cannot help but see.¹⁴ Another author, Joseph R. Myers, took this listening a step farther, stating that by creating such places, we would offer a place to belong. He identified the need to belong as one of the most pressing among people both within and outside of the church, yet the church frequently offers only another numbing activity. He pronounced this blessing on the

¹² Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, 32.

¹³ Kimball, 38.

¹⁴ Jim Walker, *Dirty Word: The Vulgar, Offensive Language of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 189.

process of creating welcoming spaces: “May the process find us effectively conversing with the people Jesus misses most.”¹⁵

We cannot converse with people, however, without a relationship. Leonard Sweet identified lack of relationship as part of the church’s problem: “Our problem in reaching the world is that we’ve made rules more important than relationship.”¹⁶ He stated that the uniqueness of Christianity and Judaism compared to other religions involves God calling us into relationship and he called the church back to a focus on relationships, both participating in a love relationship within the Trinity and loving relationships with others. Another author, Alan Hirsch, took this relationship building a step farther, insisting that the church use the context of every day life to foster relationships. He wrote: “If God’s central way of reaching his world was to incarnate himself in Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be incarnational.”¹⁷

These readings, then, enabled me to hear the stories of people outside the church through the lens of the Incarnational Christ. Jesus did not view people’s rejection of Temple religion as disinterest in God. Instead, he opened his heart to them and listened to their needs, offering them healing and grace. In the process, his followers learned that they did belong to God and to each other, as they formed new communities rooted in relationships. These relationships witnessed to the world and others wanted to find out

¹⁵ Joseph R. Meyers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

¹⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 133.

about these Christians who loved one another. After hearing these stories, I longed to participate with Jesus in creating a safe place to nurture their spiritual lives in authentic relationships.

Context of Local Ministry

The experiences I have had as a Co-Pastor at Skyline United Methodist Church prepared me to hear stories of longing for relationship and belonging. Since its founding in 1966, Skyline has always been a place that reached out to people on the margin, not offering judgment or condemnation, but instead inviting them into a community of grace. Skyline continues to welcome and serve those who find themselves marginalized and considered “outsiders” by the typical church. Our acceptance of all people moves beyond mere tolerance, but rather receives all people as a gift from God to our community. Unconcerned by issues that bother other churches, such as “that man with the long unkempt hair wearing a hat in church” or “she has a tattoo—doesn’t she know the Bible is against tattoos?” or “where is that little boy’s mother? He is sitting at the feet of the preacher and touching the altar,” Skyline’s heart instead longs to include all people into our community. One original member of Skyline reminds us from time to time that welcoming outsiders has always been part of who we are as a community. He offers up the example of Skyline becoming a “Project Equality” church in the 1960’s, stating publicly that our congregation welcomed all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, or socio-economic status. In his mind, our newest step of welcoming the LGBT population falls in line with who we have always been.

Recently, then, we have simply moved to recognizing and celebrating our ability and desire to welcome people no matter how uncomfortable we feel, and even new

comers get steeped in this value. One time, a very new member played the role of a homeless person in a drama in worship. She took her role very seriously, dressing in rags, not washing or brushing her hair, and even spraying herself with a foul odor. As she waited in the back of the sanctuary for her entrance, another woman in our community who did not recognize her approached her. She welcomed the woman to Skyline and invited her to sit with her and her family, including her young children.

Other newcomers voiced this same sense of acceptance as we sat in a new member class. One woman spoke as tears filled her eyes: “The only other church we tried asked us to leave when our 8 year old developmentally disabled daughter could not sit still through worship. Then we came to Skyline where you welcomed us with open arms.” Her husband nodded silently, too moved to speak. Others around the room also nodded in agreement. A young woman welled up with tears as she joined her voice in the conversation. “It’s been a long answered prayer of mine to find a place that would accept me for me and my family for my family, which is not easy to find in the Christian world.” She and her son attend Skyline, although she has not been able to convince her partner that any church really could accept a lesbian couple. She has not given up hope, yet, and her partner did attend her baptism and her son’s baptism.

A few others shared their stories, but the themes rang a similar tone: Skyline UMC welcomed and accepted them where other churches had not. The reasons varied from person to person, including mental illness, addiction, developmental disability, bi-racial or intercultural marriage, sexual orientation, and ADHD children, just to name a few. I have often joked to our leadership that we should have the verse from the Statue of Liberty inscribed on our doors: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses

yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”¹⁸

These stories encapsulate the heart of our community. They also resonate with my own heart. As a preacher’s kid, I always felt like an outsider in the church community. People considered us part of the preacher’s family, instead of “one of us.” In addition, I have a developmentally disabled brother, who although is physically “normal,” never developed beyond about 18 months developmentally. As a child I watched people give disapproving looks whenever my brother would call out, “Daddy!” in church or speak at other inappropriate times, even if they offered smiles to a toddler who behaved the same way. Although eventually many people in the church came around to understanding my brother, very few people moved beyond tolerance to genuine acceptance and interest in my brother as a human being. These experiences shaped my heart to be open and welcoming to people that others might dismiss.

I ache when someone feels excluded and I long to make enough room for everyone. This openness does not come, however, without its rough edges, as people learn to live with others who are different. We frequently remind ourselves and our community to have patience with one another. Instead of blaming or making assumptions about others, we encourage people to listen to each other’s stories, so that we can come to a place of understanding. Matthew 18:15-20 guides us in our relationships, approaching each other one-on-one if we feel offended and listening to each other so that we may “win each other back” to relationship.

¹⁸ Emma Lazarus. “The New Colossus,” *The Statue of Liberty* (1883). <http://www.libertystatepark.com/emma.htm> (accessed July 15, 2008).

Because we treasure people and their stories, in 2003 when we discerned we needed a strategic plan to coincide with the completion of our new building, our leadership began by listening to stories. Our Strategic Planning and Implementation Team, lovingly referred to as SPIT, interviewed key leaders, influencers, and anyone else who wished to be interviewed. We asked people to tell us a story that exemplified what they loved about Skyline and to give us their thoughts on where God wanted us to go in the future.

When the SPIT team reassembled and shared the stories we had heard, several key themes emerged. We combined these common themes into our Core Values, and to make it easier to remember, we made an acronym: SUPER. “S” stands for Supportive relationships in Christian community, recognizing God’s gift of community. “U” underscores our Unique relationship with Jesus Christ, realizing that each of us is on a unique journey and that Jesus values us as individuals. “P” points to Partners in ministry, reminding us that God calls each of us in our baptism to particular ministries and that we work together to accomplish God’s work in this world. “E” expresses our desire for Experiential worship, where we all participate in God’s relationship with each of us and the world. “R” refers to Relational reaching, where we reach out to others in mission and ministry, moving beyond a hand-out to extend a hand instead in healing relationship. Obviously, our community values relationships as not just a part of church, but the very threads of the fabric of our church community.

As we listened, we also discerned a longing to take this relationship-based community and export it, no longer requiring people to come to us, but taking the message to others in new and creative ways. Our previous vision had stated: Spirits on

Fire with Contagious Enthusiasm for Christ, and our new vision arose out of this desire for contagion. Our new vision stated: To become an apostolic church that seeds the development of new Christian communities of believers leading others in the Skyline message of Spirits on fire with contagious enthusiasm for Christ. Our focus had shifted from “Come and See”¹⁹ to “Go and Tell,”²⁰ taking on a new resurrection power.

Even our refined mission statement reflected this outward shift. Our mission had been simply: Reach, Welcome, Equip, and Send. After this process, we further developed our mission to: **REACH** out to those seeking a new or deeper relationship with God, **WELCOME** them into Christian community and commitment to Jesus Christ, **EQUIP** them to live as the Holy Spirit gifts and guides, **SEND** them out to serve and reach others in Christ’s name. Again, we emphasized relationships which expanded our community and sent us out to serve others.

Just this past June after a two year dialogue process, Skyline once again chose to expand our reach of who gets included in God’s grace by revising our mission statement to: **REACH out to all people** seeking a deeper relationship with God, regardless of age, racial, ethnic or national origin, physical or mental ability, marital status, religious experience, affectional orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status, **WELCOME them** into a community of followers of Jesus who freely choose to worship, serve, and live together prayerfully and in peace following a Methodist understanding of God’s gift of grace, **EQUIP them** to live as the Holy Spirit gifts and guides, and **SEND them** to serve and reach out to all people in Christ's name. Two years

¹⁹ See John 4:29.

²⁰ See John 20:17.

ago, some of our LGBT members asked our Lay Leader to consider including them specifically in our mission statement. Our Lay Leader brought this request to the leadership team. Through the process of strategic planning and visioning, our leadership team had become a learning team, carefully listening to stories, taking time for deep reflection on the meaning of these stories, and allowing the path forward to emerge from within these various conversations. A large part of this process involved spending the first hour of our meetings in devotions, listening to Scripture together and discerning God's word in it for us. Although some people would balk at spending so much time in this process, we discovered that by offering our presence to God and to one another in this way, we reached greater clarity and better decisions.

In the first couple of meetings, people expressed fear about members leaving and how that would impact our budget and our morale. We took some more time to listen to the congregation as a whole, to God, and to voices outside the church.²¹ As each person explored their thoughts and feelings around this issue, the sense emerged that it was the right thing to do,²² but the question remained about timing. I will never forget the meeting where we came to clarity. The topic had been ongoing for about three months and during devotions at that meeting, one of the reluctant leaders stated: "Now I know what we need to do. I am still a little afraid, but I *know* that this is where God is leading us." Everyone in the room felt that same sense and we just sat in silence for a few

²¹Peter Senge, C.Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 88. Similar to the process they call, "sensing."

²² Similar to "presencing" in Senge, et al, 88.

minutes absorbing the power of the Spirit that surrounded us.²³ From then on, the leadership team felt so unified and connected with a common purpose and collective wisdom. Something changed for all of us in that room that could not have come if we had either rushed the decision or pressured people. Again, this story illustrated for me how Skyline values people and relationships, listening carefully to stories and treasuring the persons who share them.

The Larger Context

Although ministry in my local church helped prepare my heart to hear the narratives of those “outside” the church, we do not live in a vacuum. We live connected to the larger church and to the culture as a whole, as it shifts from the Modern to the Post-Modern era. Phyllis Tickle identified the key question of this shift as: “Where now is the authority?”²⁴ This question lay at the root of various church upheavals throughout the centuries. For example, the Second Great Schism saw the election of two men as pope, throwing into question the authority of one person to be God’s representative on earth.²⁵ Then, the Protestant Reformation questioned the authority of the priests and the hierarchy of the church, claiming that Scripture alone had authority.²⁶ In the late 1800’s, science began to take on the role of authority, throwing the accuracy of Scripture into question. Part of the church’s response involved “the fundamentals,” an insistence on five doctrines

²³ Our experience of “realizing” in Senge, et al, 88.

²⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 45 and 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

that the authors held as non-negotiable.²⁷ Unfortunately, most of our society today equate these fundamentals with Christianity in its entirety, and refuse to give it a second look. As science progressed, uncertainty and relativity became the norm, and many Christians responded by rejecting science or creating their own. Meanwhile, the rise of Pentecostalism brought an emphasis on egalitarianism, gifts-based ministry, participation in worship, and an experience of the Holy Spirit as authoritative.²⁸

Instead of adapting to the changes, however, more and more people rejected the church altogether. The increased popularity of Alcoholics Anonymous, ironically founded by a Christian, offered people a way to be “spiritual but not religious.”²⁹ Then as the world became smaller through increased interaction with other countries, many people found in Buddhism what they perceived lacking in Christianity: a way to live. While Christianity continued to emphasize right beliefs, Buddhism offered people rich stories, bodily expressions of prayer, and a practical guide to life.³⁰

Sadly, many churches still live in the Modern era, fighting bitterly to hold onto the doctrine that makes them feel secure and resistant to the possibility of change. In a last stand of sorts, they attempt to answer questions no one asks anymore, such as the billboards that advertise: “Smoking or non-smoking: How will you spend eternity?” with some Biblical reference that most people have no clue about what it says and no desire or

²⁷ Tickle, 66.

²⁸ Ibid., 84-85.

²⁹ Ibid., 91.

³⁰ Ibid., 96.

knowledge of how to find it. In an effort to comfort themselves, entrenched church people cut off any possibility of dialogue.

I witnessed this first hand at Annual Conference this year. Unfortunately, my denomination—the United Methodist Church—still lives in the print culture, emphasizing the written word (be it Scripture or the United Methodist Book of Discipline) as the source of authority,³¹ and valuing rules over relationships. During a session on ratifying a constitutional amendment approved at General Conference on welcoming all people into the church, we began our “debate” using Robert’s Rules, and my heart broke. No one listened to each other, but simply stated their own rational arguments in support or opposition to the amendment. I rose to speak, the fifth person to approach the microphone, when someone anonymously “called the question,” effectively ending any conversation on the issue even though more than six people stood ready to add their voices to the dialogue. I longed for genuine dialogue and instead partook in a farce. Our conference narrowly defeated the amendment, 51% to 49%, preferring to make rules about keeping people out than face the difficult challenges of welcoming diverse people into the body of Christ.

This situation arose in part because we did not feel interconnected enough in relationship to listen together.³² Additionally, most of the attendees at Annual Conference operate from the print mind-set coming from the older generations, and thus demonstrating a frustrating generation gap. At one point, the Conference Director of Young People’s Ministry announced that some youth filled the positions of equalization

³¹ M. Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 45.

³² Senge, et al, 123.

members, laity added to equal out the retired clergy vote. He invited the youth to stand, and then invited anyone under the age of thirty-five to stand with them. Their numbers grew from eleven to fourteen, clearly exposing the missing voices. Although my age places me in the Gen X bracket, I relate to the eight Net Gen norms explored by Don Tapscott, possibly because my Net Gen children demand it of me. Our Annual Conference displayed none of the freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed, and innovation³³ that young people, according to Tapscott, have come to expect. Instead, the conference leaders subjected us to talking heads reading dry reports arising from hierarchical leaders at glacial speed describing the latest “one-size-fits-all” fixes, and simply invited us to trust what they stated.

They have not discovered genuine truth as Leonard Sweet described: “Truth resides in relationships, not documents or principles.”³⁴ In the Modern era, science determined the veracity of truth. However, with the discovery of how the act of observation changes the thing being observed, truth became relative and unknowable. Each person could determine their own truth and Christianity no longer held sway as “the truth.” To a generation raised on scientific truth, this change threatened the very core of their faith. To the Post-Modern generation, however, uncertainty became a way of life and they reincorporated mystery into their faith. Right belief did not rank as high as right practice in their experience, so they made peace with the mysterious. They uncovered what Sweet claimed: “And for the Christian, truth is a person.”³⁵

³³ Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 74.

³⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2000), 131.

³⁵ Sweet, *Out of the Question*, 33.

In relationship with Jesus who is “the way, the truth, and the life,”³⁶ truth requires give and take. This participation in the truth appeals to Post-Modern people who also incorporate experience into truth. Sweet quoted a popular phrase which often gets cut off: “Seeing is believing, but feeling’s the truth.”³⁷ In his book, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, Sweet summarized the needs of Post-Modern people in an acronym: EPIC, where E stood for Experiential, P stood for Participatory, I stood for Image driven, and C stood for Connective. Reflecting on the stories we heard, we could see these desires clearly. People want to experience their faith, to have it be a living relationship, not a set of rules. They do not want someone telling them what to think or “doing” worship for them; they want to participate at all levels. Many spoke in metaphorical language, underscoring the importance of images. They also longed to belong and feel a sense of connection with others. In that way, truth becomes an experience lived in community.

M. Rex Miller in his book, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reaffirming the Future of the Church*, stated that another way: “Truth is collective and contextual.”³⁸ His claim that people of the digital generation need to seek and find for themselves resonated with the comments we heard from people who wanted to be able to question and argue and explore. Popular culture also reflected this attitude, such as in a novel I read, called *Monstrous Regiment*, which contained a line that highlighted how people value the exploration more than the answer: “The presence of those seeking the

³⁶ See John 4:6.

³⁷ Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, 15.

³⁸ Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 87.

truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it."³⁹ They also wanted to be able to integrate various "truths" without claiming exclusivity to one way. Miller stated that this generation would be less like to polarize issues and instead lean toward dialogue,⁴⁰ a longing we heard in stories as well. This dialogue process would allow them to integrate many aspects of their lives,⁴¹ instead of the compartmentalization which gives rise to charges of hypocrisy against Christians. He went on to write that the digital generation longs for authenticity in relationships,⁴² which allow for dialogue to take place.

Any dialogue, however, requires serious attention to the divisions people make between "religion" and "spirituality." We heard this distinction several times in the stories we collected. One 23 year old woman stated it this way: "I feel that people use their religion and God as excuses for their actions or lack of actions, as well as not taking responsibility for themselves. I also feel it is a way to excuse making judgments of other people." A 23 year old man who did not practice "religion" did claim to practice spirituality by the way he lived: "I practice spirituality by my behavior—in caring for others." These people from the younger generation hold a clear distinction between religion and spirituality, with religion coming up short. In a commentary in our local newspaper, one author quoted Madonna making this dichotomy: "I like to draw a line between religion and spirituality. For me, the idea of God, or the idea of spirit, has

³⁹ Terry Pratchett, *Monstrous Regiment* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 192.

⁴⁰ Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.

nothing to do with religion. Religion is about separating people, and I don't think that was ever the Creator's intention.”⁴³

Contemporary authors continue to publish books on spirituality, scrubbing any sniff of religion or redefining the problem as authoritarian religion. In their book, *How God Changes Your Brain*, Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman wrote that the contemporary troubles arise not from religion but from authoritarianism and the angry drive to force beliefs on other people.⁴⁴ They described how God has evolved through the centuries and gave evidence of how meditation impacts the human brain from a variety of religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. They demonstrated how these practices change the functioning of the brain, explaining the neuroscience behind how meditation works. These authors also include chapters dedicated to helping readers create their own “spiritual” practices, which can be performed with or without a notion of God and which benefit not only the practitioner, but also the relationships around them. They defined God as a metaphor that involved feelings more than ideas.⁴⁵ In the epilogue, Newberg offered this explanation of his journey:

For those who embark on a spiritual journey, God becomes a metaphor reflecting their personal search for truth. It is a journey inward toward self-awareness, salvation, or enlightenment, and for those who are touched by this mystical experience, life becomes more meaningful and rich. Personally, I believe there has to be an absolute truth about the universe. I

⁴³ “‘Spirituality’ class is still religion in the schools,” *The News Journal*, 28 April 2009, sec. A, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

don't know what it is, but I am driven to seek it, using science, philosophy, and spirituality as my guide.⁴⁶

His testimony reiterated several themes from the stories we heard both locally and within our culture, such as valuing the search, the mystery of God, and integrating various disciplines into his understanding of who God is and how he lives out that relationship with God and with others. He remained open to searching for “truth,” and recognized that he would not discover it through a proposition but a journey in relationship with others.

The Hope and Desire of the Project

As my LAC and I reflected on these stories, we also attempted to get in touch with our own longings for God and for authentic relationships where we could continue our spiritual journeys. In this process, I discovered that I understand this longing, because I share it. I long to live in a community where people live their faith together daily. I long to share life with people whose faith fully integrates into their lives and moves beyond a “to-do” on their check-list. I long for a community where we empower each other to be the best God created us to be, a place where we help each other grow spiritually.

So, when I heard about the emerging church movement of communities meeting in homes doing life together as Jesus-followers, my heart dreamed of the possibilities. Skyline has lived through the difficult times of community and we found ourselves spiraling around again to the idea of our strategic plan's vision: To become an apostolic church that seeds the development of new Christian communities of believers leading others in the Skyline message of Spirits on fire with contagious enthusiasm for Christ. When we designed this strategic plan, we envisioned not new “daughter churches” in the

⁴⁶ Newberg and Waldman, 246.

traditional sense, but organic, active, chaotic, living communities of Jesus-followers whose lives impact people around them every day, inviting them to want to join in this movement, much like the expansion of the early church.

This model also replicates part of what made the Methodist movement in the United States so successful. Methodism began as a movement, not an institution. As the movement expanded and grew, it became more “respectable” and “organized.” Unfortunately, it also lost much of its fervor and spirit. In its early days, Methodism relied on relationships and accountability for living the faith. Classes, bands, and societies met together for mutual encouragement as they learned together how to put their faith into practice. Even the term, “Methodist,” arose because these early people had a method for living their faith. Lay people led the societies and circuit riding pastors came around for the “official” business of communion, weddings, baptisms, and confirmation. The movement became organic, chaotic, and explosive as people joined not to have ministry done for them, but to participate in something bigger than themselves. Their faith involved a journey built around relationships where they lived bathed in grace and strived for “perfection,” which John Wesley defined as “perfect love of God and perfect love of stranger,” based on Jesus’ definition of the most important commandments.

When I read *The Forgotten Ways*, by Alan Hirsch, I shared his desire to build authentic communities “where all who came our way would experience love, acceptance, and forgiveness, no matter what—we *did* know a little about grace as we had all experienced it so convincingly ourselves.”⁴⁷ Together with my LAC, we envisioned Gathering Groups that would focus on relationships instead of doctrine to address some

⁴⁷ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 31.

of the concerns that postmodern people have with “church people.” We decided to use avenues outside of the church building (homes, offices, coffeehouses, bars, etc.) to begin building authentic relationships with those outside the church. These groups would plant the seeds for making disciples by creating a place where authentic relationships could develop between those inside and those outside the church, focusing on accepting people and listening to their hearts without judgment or fear. Each one would look different as it reflects the diversity of our global world. We hoped that these relationships would allow us to share life together in a way that expressed our faith and provided pathways to ministry and opportunities to share the story of Jesus. We also desired through the process to gain a deeper connection with the heart of God, expanding our experience of who God is by spending time with people created in God’s image. In spending time with people outside the church, we hoped to hear their longings and understand their needs. Sweet wrote: “Each one of us is a new telling of God’s unending love story.”⁴⁸ We longed to hear and participate in that on-going love story.

⁴⁸ Sweet, *Out of the Question*, 74.

CHAPTER 2

THE NOURISHMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Although many Biblical stories depict the importance of relationship, the book of Ruth captures my imagination as one that offers many insights to our situation. In the beginning of the story, Naomi, together with her husband, Elimelek, and two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, leave their homeland when famine strikes. Ironically, the name of their town, Bethlehem, means “House of Bread,” yet it had no bread, much like the church today that follows the “Bread of Life” yet offers no nourishment to hungry people. Instead of hunkering down, however, and hoarding what bread remained, Naomi and Elimelek set off in search of food and settle in the foreign land of Moab.

In Moab, Naomi and her family do not stay isolated. Instead, they build relationships with the people there, as evidenced by her sons who found wives, Orpah and Ruth. Before they could have children, however, Naomi’s sons die as did her husband, Elimelek. Grieving and alone, Naomi instructs her daughters-in-law to return to their own families. In their culture, women could not provide for themselves, therefore they would return to the home of a male relative when widowed. Orpah weeps and leaves her mother-in-law to return home.

Ruth, on the other hand, refuses to leave Naomi. Something has transpired between these two women so that Ruth would risk leaving her homeland and go with

Naomi to a foreign land. Their relationship proves deep enough for Ruth to make a vow to Naomi: “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.”¹ Clearly, in the years that these two women spend together, they develop a close relationship which transcends cultural differences. Naomi and Ruth, then, return to Israel together.

Once back in Bethlehem, Naomi greets her kin with the instruction to call her “Mara,” which means, “bitter,” since she returns without her husband or sons. However, Ruth continues to show her kindness, asking permission to go glean fields in order to provide for them both. In the field, she meets Boaz, Naomi’s next of kin. Boaz recognizes Ruth’s kindness toward her mother-in-law and allows her to glean under his protection. Eventually, he arranges to purchase or “redeem” Naomi’s husband’s field and marry Ruth, the foreigner who has shown such kindness to Naomi. Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed, whom Naomi loves greatly and so reverses her bitterness into joy, providing her redemption. Obed becomes the grandfather of King David, who redeems all of Israel, and the ancestor of Jesus, the Bread of Life.

This ancient story has many insights to offer the situation we wanted to address. Naomi symbolizes for me the church, finding ourselves famished and needing to go into a foreign land to establish relationships with strangers. However, often we simply stay put, too afraid of the strangers to venture far outside the church walls. Naomi invites us to risk leaving the comfort of our church to go into a culture which seems very foreign to us and to befriend those we encounter. These friendships would take time to build, though, in order to be truly authentic. However, through these friendships, just as Naomi

¹ Ruth 1:16b, NLT.

discovers in her friendship with Ruth, we would ultimately find redemption, a reversal of reality bringing hope. By building authentic relationships with people outside the church, we hope to encounter God's presence in a new way, as Naomi did through Ruth.

Ruth embodies God's self-giving love in relationship with Naomi, by leaving her homeland and working for Naomi's redemption. She willingly gives up her gods and her culture to stay with Naomi, which serves as a testament to their relationship. Ruth also invites us leave behind the familiar territory in order to offer redemption to another. Through the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, Israel discovers that kindness, not a pure bloodline, gives birth first to the king (King David) who would be a shepherd to Israel, and eventually to a Savior who would redeem us all. In this way, kindness becomes generative, giving life to Ruth, Obed, and Naomi. Kindness, then, would play an important role in any relationships we wanted to build with strangers. This story reminds me that although we in the church may look more like Naomi now, full of bitterness and in need of redemption, God calls us to reflect Ruth's example of reaching out in kindness and in self-giving love.

Ruth's story of reaching out in love also fits in well with our Wesleyan understanding of grace. Methodism emphasizes grace, the free, unconditional gift of God's love that activates the process of salvation. Salvation, then, becomes not assent to a certain set of beliefs, but a way of living in relationships in response to God's love that takes a lifetime to accomplish. In Wesleyan theology, grace has three movements: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying.

Prevenient grace refers to God's grace which reaches out to people drawing them into a relationship of love. The word prevenient comes from the roots: "pre" meaning

“before,” and “venire” meaning “come,” literally making it grace that comes before humans even know how to respond. Ruth’s story demonstrates God’s prevenient grace in that God prepared a way for both Naomi and Ruth, going before them to provide physical, relational, and spiritual nourishment. Instead of viewing God as a commodity that the church possesses, prevenient grace invites us to recognize God at work already in the lives of those outside the church. God works as the Shepherd leaving the 99 to go search out the lost sheep, rejoicing when finding the one.² Our work, then, involves helping people recognize the work of God in their lives, seeking after them, rather than giving them something they do not already possess.

As people recognize and experience God’s amazing love in their lives, they feel called to respond. This response involves a conversion, a turning toward God, whose love gently pulls them. Once we experience and accept God’s amazing love and turn toward it, we discover a justifying grace in Jesus Christ, which forgives us and restores us to the very image of God in which God created us. This grace heals our brokenness and empowers us to reconcile broken relationships. As we become more attuned to that image of God within us, we also begin to more readily distinguish it in others, even people who do not share our beliefs.

Justifying grace does not end our journey. Instead, we enter into sanctifying grace, where we allow God to work within us so that we become more like God. As Christ’s love grows deeper within us, we work with grace toward perfection, which Methodists do not define as being without sin, but rather as perfect love of God and perfect love of neighbor. This perfect love comes from Jesus’ definition of the two

² See Luke 15:1-7.

greatest commandments in Mark 12:29-31: “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”³

As we mature in this perfect love of God and neighbor, we become more accepting of people wherever they are on their journey of salvation and we seek to participate in God’s work of loving people into relationship. By loving God more, we long to love those whom God loves and seek those whom God seeks. Thus, we become a church that does not stand around waiting for the Shepherd to return, but one that goes with the Shepherd in search of the lost. In the process, we discover that we, too, have been found by that amazing love in Jesus.

The Nature of God and Jesus Christ

Loving God and knowing God go hand in hand; thus as we come to love God more, we also come to know God more. How do we come to know God more? Traditionally, Christians answer that question with the Bible, and the Bible offers us a great starting point. However, how we read the Bible impacts the God we discover. If we read it as a closed book containing a set of intellectual truths to believe, we miss out on God’s invitation to relationship through Scripture. Instead, read as a love letter or a self-communication of God’s love, we experience the power of lived relationship that God longs to have with us.

³ Mark 12:29-31, NLT.

When we understand Scripture in this way, we open ourselves to God's self-revelation through other means as well. Celtic Christianity suggests creation as an additional means of God's self-revelation: "Creation's life partakes of the essence of God's life, and to that extent is a theophany or manifestation of the mystery of God."⁴ Therefore, we grow to know God by listening to the heart of creation. Since we believe that God creates human beings in God's image,⁵ we learn of God not only in the wonder and majesty of nature, but through the beauty and diversity of human beings as well.

In observing other people with the eyes of the heart, longing to see that of God in others, we discover a depth beyond our understanding. Although many people in the church want to define God in concrete terms and feel uncomfortable with mystery, people outside the church and postmodern people in general "luxuriate in mystery."⁶ In people, we see a richness of diversity that expands our experience and knowledge of God, moving beyond definable categories to a limitless being steeped in mystery. In the very act of looking for God in other people, even those "outside" of the church, we imply that God engages in mysterious ways in the lives of others. We recognize that "God is already present and already touching people's lives."⁷ In this process, we experience not

⁴ J. Philip Newell, *The Book of Creation: an Introduction to Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 19.

⁵ See Genesis 1:27.

⁶ Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 44.

⁷ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 24.

hopelessness or being overwhelmed, but rather we sense a God whose love in Jesus is “too great to fully understand,”⁸ and who is fully present to all of creation.

We can, however, get glimpses of the nature of God through the people God creates. As we come to know people and appreciate the various ways in which they love others, we see a God who loves each one of us in just the way we need to be loved. When people share their insights, wisdom, and knowledge, we find a God who gives each of us different ways of knowing and learning, so that we can discover together the secrets of the universe. Marveling in people’s diverse creativity and imagination, including musicians, artists, and authors, but also counselors, chefs, athletes, parents, etc., we find a God whose creativity knows no bounds but who also thoroughly enjoys sharing this creativity with people. In seeing people’s pain, we encounter a God whose heart breaks with and for us, who longs to heal us, and who shares that compassion with us so that we can share it with each other. In fact, God desires so much to be with us in all situations, that God still seeks us. Celtic spirituality describes God as one who “still walks in the garden of our souls searching for us.”⁹ Noticing God through others, then, we realize that God loves us, giving each one of diverse ways of learning and creativity so that we need each other, thus also giving the gift of community, where we can share our pain and can experience together the compassion and soul-searching healing of God’s love.

In essence, then, creation itself reveals God’s self-giving love and generosity, making both revelation and creation an on-going process. This process understanding frees us from expecting a finished product in either nature or people or the church, as we

⁸ Ephesians 3:19, NLT.

⁹ Newell, 87.

recognize that God has not completed creation, yet. We can instead find hope and joy in this on-going process. As we critique the way the church acts and how people perceive Christians and Christianity, we do not do so to dismiss the church, but rather to engage in the continuing course of God's generative work. Evolution, then, of the world, of people, and of the church, becomes a "built-in, gracious dynamic of God's universe,"¹⁰ an expression of God's generous grace through creativity. Human creativity echoes God's creative activity, as God invites us to participate. Through this invitation, God gives up control of the end product, and demonstrates a way for us to share collaboratively in creativity with others. One author notes: "Recent systems theory studies are suggesting that creativity itself is less the work of one creative individual and more the result of the interrelationship of cultural factors."¹¹ In other words, creativity arises out of collaborative relationship, not individual effort.

God, with abundant love and grace, invites us into the collaborative, creative, generative relationship within the Trinity. As a theological construct, "Trinity" connotes that God in essence exists in community. In this community, each member depends on the other for their self-definition and life. "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not just one in their love and respect for each other: as in all good relationships, their mutuality actually makes each other who they are."¹² Again, out of God's copious love flows a

¹⁰ Bruce Sanguin, *The Emerging Church: a Model for Change and a Map for Renewal* (Kelowna, BC, Canada: Copper House, 2008), 23.

¹¹ Troy Bronsink, "The Art of Emergence: Being God's Handiwork," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 69.

¹² Michael Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2004), 38.

request for humanity to enter into that bond of relationship, to participate in that love and mutuality, sacrificing control, making room, and becoming vulnerable to experience the joy and the agony of relationship.

My favorite description of the Trinity comes from Brian McLaren's book, *A Generous Or+hodoxy*:

I learned that the early church leaders described the Trinity using the term *perichoresis* (*peri*—circle, *choresis*—dance): the Trinity was an eternal dance of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy, and respect. Against this backdrop, God's act of creation means that God is inviting more and more beings into the eternal dance of joy. Sin means that people are stepping out of the dance, corrupting its beauty and rhythm, crashing and tackling and stomping on feet instead of moving with grace, rhythm, and reverence. Then, in Jesus, God enters creation to restore the rhythm and beauty again.¹³

Although I would argue that God did not *first* enter creation in Jesus, God did *uniquely* enter creation in Jesus to bring us back into the eternal dance of love that God calls us to dance with all of our hearts. In this dance, we discover the vital importance of the give and take mutual respect of relationship and we learn the steps as the dance continues.

This image focuses on the relational quality of God, who invites us to an experience, not just head knowledge, and to know God fully even as we are fully known.¹⁴ Our understanding of God shifts from noun as “answer” to verb as relational experience.¹⁵

Jesus embodies this shift from God as belief system or law to God as relationship. Marcus Borg, in describing Jesus as mystic, states: “For Jesus, God was not simply an

¹³ Brian D. McLaren, *a Generous Or+hodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 56.

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁵ Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 153.

article of belief, but an experienced reality...the term *mystic* designates the kind of person Jesus was—someone who experienced God vividly and whose way of seeing and life were changed as a result.”¹⁶ Everything Jesus says and does, his healings, his relationships, his teaching, arises out of this experienced relationship with God. Because of the intimacy of Jesus’ relationship with God, he reflects God fully in human form, as Colossians 1:19 claims: “For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ.”¹⁷

Because of the incarnation, Jesus not only fully reflects God but also fully identifies with humanity. This means that relationships impact who Jesus is, just as relationships shape who we become. Relationships involve give and take, not just a one-way flow. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch argue that Jesus’ social milieu does impact Jesus’ identity: “He was changed in some way by all those he came in contact with in precisely the same way that we are changed by our relationships—for good or ill.”¹⁸ Like Elphaba and Glinda sing in the song, “For Good,” from *Wicked*: “Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better? But because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”¹⁹ Relationships change Jesus and they change us.

This change involves risking vulnerability as we cannot control others. Jesus, then, displays God’s willingness to become vulnerable and to give up control in order to risk relationship with us. These relationships do not end on the cross with the historical

¹⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 110.

¹⁷ Colossians 1:19, NLT.

¹⁸ Frost and Hirsch, 36.

¹⁹ Stephen Schwartz, et al., “For Good,” in *Wicked A New Musical: Original Broadway Cast Recording*, New York: Decca Broadway, 2003.

Jesus. Instead, the Incarnate and Risen Christ continues to knock at the door of the hearts of all who will respond,²⁰ and “creating new narratives of Christ’s work by the Spirit.”²¹ By inviting us into relationship, Jesus also invites us to share that risk and vulnerability as we enter into relationship with each other.

Because of this on-going relationship, Jesus does not only “prepare us to die but [teaches] us how to live.”²² Borg claims that Jesus instructs us to live in a way that reflects God’s character: “Jesus speaks of compassion not only as the primary quality of God, but also as the primary quality of a life lived in accord with God.”²³ Through our relationship with Jesus, we become more like God, and therefore grow in compassion as we participate in God’s compassion toward others.

Having compassion requires us to spend time with those God loves, which includes the whole world, not just those who identify as Christian. Many Christians ensconce themselves within the Christian sub-culture, afraid to engage with the world. But, Jesus goes everywhere in the world and invites us to follow. Philip Newell writes that Celtic Christianity understands that as Christians, we bear Christ into the world, not away from it: “Christ leads us toward the heart of humanity, not into a type of separation from it.”²⁴ Only by spending time with people can we ever grow to love them.

²⁰ See Revelation 3:20.

²¹ Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 135.

²² Claiborne, 117.

²³ Borg, 175.

²⁴ Newell, 93.

In spending time with people, however, we do not simply tell them what we believe. Instead, we express our participation in God's compassion by listening. The gospels describe Jesus listening when they record him asking questions. "Why are you afraid?"²⁵ "Who touched me?"²⁶ "But who do you say I am?"²⁷ "Where are your accusers?"²⁸ "What do you want me to do for you?"²⁹ "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"³⁰ Jesus asks these questions and genuinely listens to hear the answer. In order to participate in God's compassion, Jesus invites us to ask questions and listen as well as a way of deepening relationships.

Listening requires us to sacrifice our need to talk or convince people of our rightness. This sacrifice reflects the way Jesus repeatedly sacrifices control in order to remain in relationship, beginning with the cross. Of course, we have many different ways of interpreting the work of the cross and the meaning of atonement, even though most people, including those inside and outside of the church, only know of the "substitutionary" theory of atonement. This theory holds that God cannot stand people because of their sin, which demands a payment. So, God sends Jesus into the world to go to the cross as a substitute for our death. Many people outside the church reject this

²⁵ Mark 4:5, NLT.

²⁶ Luke 8:45, NLT.

²⁷ Luke 9:20, NLT.

²⁸ John 8:10, NLT.

²⁹ Matthew 20:23, NLT.

³⁰ Luke 10:26, NLT.

understanding of atonement because it does not seem congruent with a loving, compassionate God.

However, Christians through the ages have understood the atonement in very different ways. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the fear of death enslaves humanity, driving people to greed, materialism, desperation, injustice, and selfishness, among other sin, so Christ came to be victorious (“Christus Victor”) over death bringing life to the church through the resurrection.³¹ Since death no longer has the final word, humanity can live differently. The Eastern Orthodox Church holds a slight variation to that understanding, focusing on the incarnation as salvific by bringing God’s healing into the world. As described above in the circle dance description of the Trinity, sin means being out of step and through the incarnation, Jesus invites us back into the dance.

Other Christians view atonement through a revelatory means. Jesus reveals God’s love and teaches us how to respond with compassion to humanity, working for justice. Along the same lines, other Christians believe that through the cross, Jesus confronted the evil powers and systems of this world, again inviting us to work alongside him now to address the same inequities. In another variation of this, Anabaptists, such as Mennonites, believe that Jesus inaugurates a new community here on earth of people who live as Jesus taught them, in love and peace. To summarize, conservative Christians tend to focus on the crucifixion, Roman Catholics on the resurrection, Eastern Orthodox on the incarnation, Mainline Protestants on the revelation of Christ, and Anabaptists on the community which gathers around the Risen Christ.³²

³¹ McLaren, 53.

³² Ibid., 64-65.

Celtic Christianity also emphasizes the revelatory nature of Jesus. Newell states that Christ liberates us by revealing the fullness of God which then shows us our truest self.³³ Christ sets free the true light which is within us from our creation in God's image and which the darkness does not overcome.³⁴ McLaren suggests that atonement cannot be limited to any one of these interpretations, but rather that each of them informs the other and thus broadens or deepens our experience of Christ.³⁵ Although I agree with him, I do think that people equate the substitutionary theory of atonement with the public face of Christianity and need to be introduced to the other interpretations as well.

The understandings of atonement that best fit our project emphasize relationships, which would lean more heavily toward the Celtic, incarnational, revelatory, and communal interpretations. From the Celtic tradition, we learn that people have the light of Christ within them from the time of their creation. Therefore, we can learn of Christ by listening to all people, including those outside the church. The incarnational understanding prompts us to invite people to join the dance of relationship, not wanting any to sit on the side. From the revelatory perspective, we hear an invitation to work toward justice, which appeals to people outside of the church who long to make a difference in the world and not just talk about Jesus. The communal interpretation invites us to gather a community around the presence of Jesus. All of these approaches involve sacrifice in one way or another, but the sacrifice leads to restored relationships with God and with each other.

³³ Newell, 94.

³⁴ See John 1:5.

³⁵ McLaren., 66.

Bruce Sanguin, in *The Emerging Church*, affirms that postmodern people embrace a global, pluralistic mindset, which incorporates even seemingly disparate ideas into one understanding. This multifaceted understanding results in casting a wider net of who is included in Christ's kingdom. "The Christ of postmodernism has widened his net to include *all of us*, not just *us* (my nation, my tribe, my religion, my family)." ³⁶ For me, this widening of the net comprises just the next step in the ever expanding circle of grace contained in the story of God's people. First, in Genesis, Abraham believes God only serves his family, as we hear of "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Then, that grace broadens to include the 12 tribes of Israel, as a people in the land of Egypt. When Israel gains a king, God becomes the God of their nation. However, when the Israelites find themselves in exile, they struggle with their understanding of a nationalistic God, as the prophets call them to recognize God as God of all and to accept their role as "light to the nations," eventually including the Gentiles.

When Jesus comes, he continues that expansion of grace, including people labeled "sinners" because they could not keep the law, the despised tax-collectors, women, Gentiles, and people who were unclean. Although his acceptance of all gets him in trouble with the religious authorities of the day, Jesus insists that his God has room for "sheep from other folds." The early church continues to wrestle with who God's grace includes, initially insisting that outsiders first become like them through circumcision before they can be acceptable to God. But, Peter and Paul both experience the presence of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles and insist that God's grace now includes all.

³⁶ Sanguin, 96.

Throughout church history, Christians continue to argue over who is included in God's grace, eventually coming to accept people of different races (especially in the American church), women, people with developmental disabilities, divorcees, and may even include eventually all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Jesus stands firmly in this tradition of the ever-expanding circle of God's grace. As the image of the invisible God, Jesus displays God's nature through his relational existence, which demonstrates his willingness to be vulnerable and give up control. His searching and longing for people and his patient listening to us express God's compassion and love. Jesus' creativity through his healing reflects God's on-going creation and invitation for humanity to participate in that creativity. His creative work in redemption exhibits the sacrificial nature of God's love and the restoration of broken relationships through such sacrifice. These attributes show us the way to live a life filled with relationships built on God's compassion and love.

The Nature of the Church and Evangelism

We cannot live this life alone; the nature of relationships requires us to be around others and the demands of living a compassionate life can better be fulfilled in a community which shares that vision. But how we understand that community guides how we live this life together. Some understandings of the nature of the church keep the community self-centered, others focus on continuing Christ's mission here on earth, while still others emphasize the communal nature. However, a blend of these understandings may best serve the church as it grows into the future.

Some Christians believe that the church is the Bride of Christ.³⁷ This image conjures up visions of a spotless, pure bride dressed in white going to meet her groom. This ecclesiology emphasizes the holiness of the church. Church becomes a place where people come to be washed and purified. Of course, those who do not submit to such washing, or those whose dirt cannot be washed away, cannot be admitted to this type of church. In addition, members of the Bride of Christ must guard against getting dirty, so do not mix with those who they deem “unclean.” Neil Cole calls this image “the Zombie Bride” because of its lifelessness.³⁸ When we worry so much about becoming dirty, we cannot live.

Along a similar vein, other Christians understand church as God’s Temple. Although the Bible talks about this Temple being built with living stones,³⁹ a building typically remains stable and in one place. People with this view focus on keeping the foundation the same and become set in their ways. They cannot open themselves to change for fear the Temple would crash down around them. Again, this static interpretation of church and its nature cannot bring life to people or adapt God’s message to a changing culture because the people spend their energy conserving the beliefs of the past instead of living into God’s future.

³⁷ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ See 1 Peter 2:5.

Another lifeless image comes from the story of Noah's ark.⁴⁰ Again, this image brings to mind a chosen few who must remain separate in order to be saved from this world. The world, then, becomes a dangerous place rather than God's garden, and people must get on board before they drown. In this view, people outside the church act as a threat to those inside, since they represent the corrupt nature of humanity. All three of these images, Bride of Christ, God's Temple, and Noah's ark, alienate the church from people outside of the church, only interacting when people come into the church instead of encouraging interaction and the building of relationships in all areas of life.

A second set of ecclesiological images accentuates the role of the church in the on-going mission of Jesus on the earth. The Roman Catholic Church describes the church in various ways, including the continued incarnation of Christ.⁴¹ This view stresses the need of Jesus' followers to continue Jesus' presence on the earth by being Christ for others, going where Christ would go, and doing what Jesus would do. As a more active image, God's people go out into the world instead of being cloistered in the church and they focus on joining God in the on-going mission of Christ.

A similar conception of church moves away from continuing the incarnation to instead serving as a representative of Christ, which slightly nuances the interpretation but affects how people live. To be the incarnate Christ in the world, we must ask ourselves what Jesus would be doing. To serve as a representative, we can go anywhere we want, but in all situations we represent Jesus. Some scholars in this view consider the church a

⁴⁰ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 223.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

sacrament,⁴² which can be defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁴³ As signs, people point to God’s on-going work on earth in Jesus Christ. Others argue that the church represents Christ, but not well. Dan Kimball quotes Ghandi to illustrate this: “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”⁴⁴ As representatives or signs, God calls the church to point to the grace and love of Jesus.

A more embodying form of this interpretation envisions the church as the body of Christ. Again, this picture offers people a way to “participate in God.”⁴⁵ Although overused, the image of the body of Christ suggests an organic, living being which can breath the Spirit of God, follow where Christ goes, and work together to accomplish God’s mission on earth. Alan Hirsch describes this as the true church which organizes its life around “its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world.”⁴⁶ As a body contains diversity, so the church reflects that diversity, but also works together to accomplish God’s work. The body of Christ image invites people to work together to be the church as Christ’s presence in this world.

⁴² Karkkainen, 29.

⁴³ I remember this phrase from baptisms conducted in my church as a child, although I cannot find it written in any official liturgy of the UMC. I did find it online, however: “Christian Symbolism,” accessed 6 November 2009; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_symbolism; Internet.

⁴⁴ Kimball, 37.

⁴⁵ Moynagh, 144.

⁴⁶ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 82.

A third set of ecclesiological images underscores the importance of this togetherness in community. Leonard Sweet combines two images, suggesting the church exists to incarnate connectedness.⁴⁷ Other scholars define the church as “communion of saints,”⁴⁸ highlighting again both the communal and sacramental nature of God’s people. Still others point to the church as the “family of God.” This tradition especially speaks to Christians in Africa, who understand Christ as Ancestor:

The church as Family of God can be promoted through a rich Christology of ‘Christ as Ancestor’...One research study shows that among the 232 African names and descriptions of Jesus Christ, the most common are names connected to Jesus as ‘Ancestor,’ as ‘Brother,’ and as ‘Intercessor-Mediator.’⁴⁹

These views stress the importance of community and relationships to the church’s mission and self-understanding.

Another interpretation of the church that emphasizes community comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which identifies the church as reflecting the image of the Trinity. This image values the interconnectedness of all of creation and insists that relationships with God and with others serve as the primary authority in deciding upon the mission of the church.⁵⁰ Since the church reproduces the image of Trinity on earth,

⁴⁷ Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 116.

⁴⁸ Karkkainen, 119.

⁴⁹ Rev. Joseph Healey, M.M. (Tanzania), Mrs. Rose Musimba (Kenya), Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwanaiia Nzeki (Kenya), Rev. Aylward Sharter, M. Afr. (Kenya), and Rev. John Mary Waliggo (Uganda), “The Evolving Sociology and Ecclesiology of Church as Family in Eastern Africa,” in *Small Christian Communities: Imagining Future Church*, ed. Robert S. Pelton, CSC (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 108.

⁵⁰ Catherine Nerney, SSJ, “Response” to “Uncanny Grace: Christian Communities and the Survival of Hope,” by Curt Catorette, M.M., in *Small Christian*

the church displays the unity (as the body of Christ) and the diversity (of the gifts of the Spirit) of God, which holds together in one.⁵¹ By relating within the Trinity, God restores people in the church to their role as co-creators,⁵² participating in the on-going creation of God. The church exists wherever Jesus' presence can be found and the Holy Spirit can be seen at work.⁵³ Combined with the picture of the Trinity as a circle dance, this image comes to life in a playful, relational way, inviting all people into the dance, whether inside or outside of the church, offering life and joy everywhere God goes as embodied in God's people.

A final image of the church joins several of the organic, communal, missional components of these other symbols: the church as seed. Although not complete, this image combines several of the above understandings. In Mark 4, Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as a farmer who scatters seeds. Kathy Mattea describes this scattering of seeds in her song, "Seeds:" "We're all just seeds in God's hands. We start the same, but where we land is sometimes fertile soil and sometimes sand. We're all just seeds in God's hands."⁵⁴ As seeds, the people of God carry the very DNA (image) of God within them, recognizing the constant connectedness of God with God's people. By being scattered, we interact with the whole of creation, bearing life and giving birth to other

Communities: Imagining Future Church, ed. Robert S. Pelton, CSC (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 62.

⁵¹ Karkkainen, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ Kathy Mattea, "Seeds," accessed 6 November 2009; available from <http://www.mp3lyrics.org/k/kathy-mattea/seeds/>; Internet.

seeds. As organic beings, we live and grow and change, as our environment and the relationships surrounding us impact us. Our role involves participating in God's life-giving plan by becoming the plant (or sign) that God chooses for us. This image also respects both God's grace and our response, as we grow or remain hidden inside our shell. Gathered together, we become God's field, a harvest (or sacrament) which can feed our world which so hungers for spiritual and physical nourishment.

Just how, exactly, do we accomplish this mission of spreading the Good News? In other words, how does the church do evangelism? Traditionally, Christians have equated evangelism with passing out religious tracts or event evangelism where a speaker comes to get everyone fired up and "give their lives to Christ." When seen through that lens, other Christians shy away from that "in your face" approach, preferring instead a "soft-sell" approach like life-style evangelism (people will see how I live and become a Christian) or friendship evangelism (like FRAN: invite a Friend, Relative, Associate, Neighbor). Even servant-evangelism from Steve Sjogren⁵⁵ falls into this "soft-sell" category, doing specifically targeted deeds of kindness in order to demonstrate God's love and therefore convince people of their need for Christ.

All of these approaches make the assumption that the church has "the answer" which people need, and that answer involves "getting people into the religious zone."⁵⁶ Once inside, the church tries to get these people to assent to certain doctrinal beliefs, in order to make them a Christian. Often, then, the church leaves these "new converts" to

⁵⁵ Steve Sjogren, David Ping, Doug Pollock, *Irresistible Evangelism: Natural Ways to Open Others to Jesus* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004).

⁵⁶ Frost and Hirsch, 49.

figure out how to live out a relationship with God on their own. While spreading kindness and making friends seems like a laudable goal, when the underlying goal involves getting them to become Christian, these acts of love and friendship lose their authenticity. People outside of the church (and even inside of the church) already struggle with the underlying motivation of anything we do without giving them proof that kindness and friendship have only become tools to “win souls for Christ” instead of arising out of genuine compassion.

I see the fear arising from the underlying motivation for evangelism as I explain my project to people. One man’s comments encapsulate this feeling well: “We are not going to try to convert people, are we? Like shove Jesus down people’s throats or do a bait and switch type deal?” When I assure him that our only goal is to listen, he continues: “Good. I came to church here several weeks ago as a favor to a friend from AA. I came, but I was afraid Jesus would be pushed on me. Instead, I found an acceptance of who I am and where I am on my spiritual journey and a genuine interest in me as a person. You introduced me to Jesus, but let me come to that relationship on my own terms. Now I believe that Jesus is my higher power and I want to be in relationship with God and Jesus, not because I was forced, but because I was accepted and invited.”⁵⁷ In this instance, a man overcomes his fear and enters the church building, but only warily, and yet discovers a love and acceptance of himself, not as a number or potential convert, but just for the person God created him to be. We see so much of this type of distrust of the church from people who cannot overcome their fear of entering the building.

Something must be wrong with our understanding and forms of evangelism.

⁵⁷ Jake, not his real name, spoke to me after worship where I had introduced my project design to the congregation.

The church gravitates toward these styles of evangelism partly out of impatience. Relationships and friendships take time and effort. People think we can accomplish our task quicker by forcing people to make a decision. Sometimes, Christians try to manipulate people emotionally in order to wear them down and force a decision. Relationships, instead, demand our attention, our genuine interest in another, self-sacrificing our own agenda, in order to listen and engage with people where they are. This process requires patience and gentleness and trust in a God whose compassion runs much deeper than our own. It also asks us to risk rejection of our faith while maintaining a friendship. In risking in this way, we reflect the character of Jesus, who also risks being rejected but who loves anyway.

Any new type of evangelism we engage in will insist upon patience, risk-taking, and grace as well as trusting God throughout the whole process. Instead, in a new understanding of evangelism, we need to participate in God's goodness toward creation. Newell describes Celtic evangelism as giving to others that which we most desire ourselves. He invites us to participate in God's goodness: "Goodness, then, is not simply defined in terms of refraining from evil but of actively doing good, and thereby participating in the generosity of God."⁵⁸

Participating in God's generosity entails offering love with no expectation of return. Returning to the nature of God, who seeks and longs for us, cooperating with that compassion requires us to do the same. In other words, we need to shift from a "come and see" or a "go and tell" mentality to a "go and love" attitude. Frost and Hirsch describe this evangelism as a "cross-cultural Go-To-Them mentality. It assumes that in

⁵⁸ Newell, 43.

every human being there is a longing to know the reason for their existence, the purpose of their lives.”⁵⁹ Although I agree with their “Go-To-Them mentality,” and that every human being has a longing, I do not agree that the longing involves knowing the reason for their existence because that limits the longing to an intellectual pursuit. Instead, I think people long to know that they matter, that someone loves them.

My bias arises from my experience living with my brother, who is developmentally disabled and could not identify the purpose of his existence as the source of his longing. However, he knows when people love him and he responds to that love in tangible ways. Although he cannot assent intellectually to some doctrine or creed, I would also insist that he plays an important role in the church, teaching us how to listen with the heart and love without expectation of response. Love of any kind, of course, involves give and take and forms a two-way street. We shape the lives of those we love just as they shape ours. Any evangelism necessitates that same two-way street. Samir Selmanovic writes: “If we expect others to learn from us and be changed, we must first allow for a real possibility that we have something to learn from them and be changed by what we learn.”⁶⁰ Again, this reflects the nature of Jesus who takes the risk of vulnerability in order to enter into authentic relationship.

Evangelism calls for people to actively reflect the nature of Christ throughout the world. We do not try to get people onto the “ark,” but rather become “salt and light” in the community, engaging people as Jesus did—right where they live. Hirsch describes

⁵⁹ Frost and Hirsch, 49.

⁶⁰ Samir Selmanovic, “The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness: Finding Our God in the Other,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 197.

that model as having an incarnational lifestyle and invites people: “to become part of the very fabric of a community and to engage in the humanity of it all.”⁶¹ Going back to the seed analogy summarizes this style of evangelism: reflecting and incarnating the DNA of God, being scattered throughout the world, interacting with and relating to the different elements and allowing them to impact us and help us grow as we also impact them, being patient for evidence of the growth, and participating in God’s life-giving plan so that we can feed a hungry world.

⁶¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 133.

CHAPTER 3

PREPARING THE MEAL

How do we go about preparing a feast for people outside the church who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”? How do we both become the seeds and spread the seeds of God’s love and grace? How do we begin building authentic relationships with people outside of the church in a way that allows us to share life together on a deeper spiritual level? How can these relationships help us grow in our understanding of ourselves, God, and the church? As my LAC and I wrestled with these questions, our design came into clearer focus: we wanted to teach leaders in the church how to create environments where community could emerge so that people outside of the church could feel safe enough to share their spiritual journeys, developing relationships of trust along the way, and experiencing God’s presence in the process.

We hoped to use any information and new insights to continue to establish relationships with those outside the church and along the way discover new ways to be church. Therefore, we sought to explore the following sets of questions: Impact on Participants, Nature of the Church, and Viability of the Model. Impact on Participants questions included: How did Gathering Groups focused on establishing spiritual relationships and spiritual conversations benefit those who consider themselves spiritual but who do not attend church? How did they promote the formation of spiritual

community between those who participate in church and those who do not? What impact did these Gathering Groups have on the congregation? How did the Gathering Groups affect the team leaders and their spiritual growth? In what way did these Gathering Groups allow participants to express their faith? Nature of the Church questions included: What impact did these relationships have on the way we understand and “be” the church? How did they challenge us to rethink “church?” In what ways did these Gathering Groups become “church” for the participants? Or did they simply become a “stepping stone” into an existing congregation? Viability of the Model questions included: What changes would improve this model? How could we adapt the model to include people currently participating in an existing congregation? What are the essentials of the model? What common threads emerged between the groups?

Finding the Ingredients

Once we gained clarity on our research questions, we wanted to design a process that would allow this type of community to emerge. We knew that selecting and training leaders would be essential and that we wanted to send people out in teams. We experienced as Michael Moynagh stated: “...teams are vital. They provide leaders with support and mix up complementary skills.”¹ As we reflected on creating the dynamics of a group, we decided that people with three types of gifts would help each group: the gift of shepherding or facilitation, to guide the conversation process; the gift of hospitality, to ensure people feel welcome and safe; and the gift of new faith or questioning faith, to model asking questions and exploring various answers. In theory, we hoped to recruit three

¹ Moynagh, 177.

different people for these roles, for a total of four groups with three leaders each. In reality, we discovered that three people would have been overwhelming and the teams of two shared the three gifts between them.

Even though these leaders had gifts, we needed to focus these gifts on the purpose of our project through training. However, the model of training would need to reflect the purpose of these groups. In order to facilitate that type of training, we relied on Leonard Sweet's EPIC model: the training needed to be Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven, and Connected.² So, we examined several models to glean information and plan the training. We explored "circles of trust," a model described by Parker Palmer in *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*,³ which gave us a better grasp of our intent for these groups. We then considered how learning to listen gave rise to trust, which would be essential to our groups, and we studied William Isaacs's book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*,⁴ to understand better how to listen. We also looked at *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations that Matter*,⁵ by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and the World Café Community to comprehend how to set the stage for these conversations and strategies for asking questions.

² Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims*, xxi.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

⁴ William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

⁵ Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and the World Café Community, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005).

Finally, we investigated laying ground rules for conversation, using Eric H. F. Law's book, *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace*,⁶ which includes both questions for laying the ground rules and a model of rules called "RESPECT." These resources shaped both our understanding of the underlying dynamics of group dialogue and our conversations for training the leaders involved as we sought to utilize the gifts that each leader brought in order to create community.

Although we have certainly heard the word community bandied about quite a bit these days, we have so seldom seen it lived. Parker Palmer described this irony with a metaphor of crashing through the woods: "Unfortunately, *community* in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away."⁷ We did not want to scare the soul away, but instead longed to welcome each person to share their soul's longings, dreams, insights, and desires. Palmer reminded us that the soul wants to serve us in several ways: it wants to keep us centered in the core of our being, to keep us connected to a life-giving community, to help us uncover the truth about who we are and how we relate to our world, to give life to us and to encourage us to give life to others.⁸ Circles of trust empower the soul to serve us in this way: "Its singular purpose is to support the inner journey of each person in the group,

⁶ Eric H. F. Law, *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

⁷ Palmer, 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth...”⁹ But, to empower the soul to serve us in this way, we needed to create a safe place for the soul to appear by learning to listen.

We had all heard the saying: “God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we will listen twice as much as we speak,” and we realized the importance of listening. However, most people have not learned how to listen. Instead of truly emptying ourselves and completely listening to others, we have found ourselves formulating our response, or deciding who to blame, or coming up with a solution. To comprehend how to listen, we researched dialogue using William Isaacs’s book. He broke dialogue, which he defined as a flow of meaning gathered through relationship,¹⁰ into four steps: listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing.

Listening involved not just hearing the words, but also listening for underlying feelings and assumptions. To listen on that deeper level, people needed to quiet their own inner voice in order to focus attention on the person speaking. Instead of fighting our own inner responses, Isaacs invited people to recognize it for what it is and let it go. We found that sometimes it helped to write down a few words as we listened to help quiet and to become aware of our inner voice. In this process, we often discovered that our responses came from emotional memories which may or may not have mirrored the current topic. By

⁹ Palmer, 54.

¹⁰ Isaacs, 19.

recognizing the inner voice and giving it permission to speak, even if just to us, we could return our focus to the person talking.

In addition to listening, Isaacs invited us to respect the other, teaching us that respect means “to look again” and involves truly seeing the other.¹¹ To respect people (especially those outside of the church who feel that many church people do not respect them), we needed to accept that everyone has something to teach us in order to remain open to that possibility. Respect included accepting people and their beliefs wherever they were on their journey and connecting to some aspect of their story. Isaacs defined it as: “...looking for what is highest and best in a person and treating them as a mystery that you can never fully comprehend. They are a part of the whole, and in a very particular sense, a part of us.”¹² Respect would help create a safe place for the soul to show up by not judging what others had to say or trying to correct their beliefs or thoughts.

Once people felt heard and respected, we could invite them to suspend their thoughts. Isaacs described this suspending as spinning a thought out like a web, so that it could be observed and seen from different perspectives.¹³ He explained that suspension required people to suspend their own certainty and instead hold their own beliefs and thoughts and feelings up in order to recognize them. He suggested that people neither suppress these thoughts nor act on them,

¹¹ Isaacs, 110.

¹² Ibid., 117.

¹³ Ibid., 135.

but rather notice and examine them.¹⁴ He advised asking open-ended questions in order to help examine these thoughts and feelings. These questions would not be statements in disguise nor have right and wrong answers, but instead, would evoke more probing and discovery.

Only after we had listened, respected, and suspended could we add our voice to the dialogue. However, Isaacs recommended that we not simply repeat or state more forcefully what others had said. Instead, he proposed asking ourselves the question: “What needs to be expressed now?”¹⁵ We noticed the slight shift in focus from the way people normally respond, a shift from a self-centered approach of what I want to say to a group-focused approach of what needs to be said to move the conversation forward. In order to answer that question, we needed to have listened, respected, and suspended both our own thoughts and the thoughts of others. As we proceeded through the conversation, we would listen for common threads, for the underlying thought that the group itself attempted to articulate.

This type of dialogue involved asking questions of both ourselves and the group. People would need to feel safe enough to allow silence within, trusting that if their soul needed to speak, they would have the opportunity. So, how would we set the stage for this type of conversation? To answer that question, we turned to the World Café. The World Café presented us with a process composed of seven principles designed to create a place for conversation to happen. The principles

¹⁴ Isaacs, 147.

¹⁵ Ibid, 159.

included: setting the context, creating hospitable space, exploring questions that matter, encouraging everyone's participation, cross-pollinating and connecting diverse perspectives, listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions, and harvesting, and sharing collective discoveries.¹⁶ These principles reminded us to focus on the environment as part of hospitality and to proactively facilitate the dialogue to ensure people participated, made connections, and learned from each other. The authors listed some questions for facilitating such a dialogue, which prompted us to pay particular attention to developing questions to help the leaders encourage dialogue.

One final piece remained to create a safe environment for dialogue: how to ensure the participants felt safe enough for their souls to emerge. We thought about making a covenant but thought it might feel heavy-handed or churchy. So, we turned to Eric H. F. Law's book for help. In his book, Law explored how to create space to include others, opening people up to interacting with others who may be different from themselves. He posed some questions to help people identify what made them feel safe in group conversation. His questions included: "What do others need to know about me/us in order for me/us to function effectively in this gathering? How do I know I am being included? How do I know I am being respected? What are the community ground rules that we need to affirm before we start our work? What will we do? What will we not do?"¹⁷ These questions would help guide our development of ground rules, but we also found

¹⁶ Brown and Isaacs, 162-171.

¹⁷ Law, 65.

his ground rules helpful. He listed them as an acronym, to facilitate remembering: RESPECT. R stood for taking responsibility for what you said and felt, not blaming others for your feelings. E meant empathetic listening. S stood for remaining sensitive to different ways people think and communicate. P meant pondering what you hear and feel before responding. E stood for examining your own underlying assumptions. C meant keeping the conversations confidential. T stood for tolerating ambiguity, living in the middle, and not insisting on determining who is wrong or right.¹⁸ We suggested that the leaders ask the questions Law raised about feeling respected and adapt the RESPECT model to reflect what their participants added.

Mixing the Ingredients—Designing the Project

Now that we understood our intent, learned how to listen and engage in dialogue, set the stage and learned how to ask questions, and established ground rules, we could mix the ingredients together through an experiential, participatory, connecting time of training. We designed the project to have three phases: the training or Practice Gatherings phase, the Gathering Group phase, and the Evaluation phase. The Practice Gathering phase ran from January 28, 2009 through February 18, 2009. The Gathering Groups met at various times and locations between February 18 and April 29, 2009. The Evaluation phase took place from April 29 to May 10, 2009.

Although the training needed to be EPIC, I also needed to share some information with the leaders during these sessions. So, I designed the training

¹⁸ Law, 64.

sessions to be practice gatherings with the information shared in dialogue. I invited the Gathering Group leaders to meet at my home for dinner for four consecutive Wednesday evenings. We would begin each session with an icebreaker created to evoke stories. Then we would share a meal together and use the meal time to dialogue about the various training topics, using role-playing and modeling behavior and brainstorming various responses to situations.

I designed week one as an introduction. For an icebreaker, I planned to ask them to share a funny story about their childhood. After the icebreaker, I would ask each person why they responded to the invitation and what hopes they had for the project. Then, I intended to share the background narratives of concern and purpose of the project, inviting responses along the way. I would ask them what underlying theological assumptions they detected by asking these questions: What does this project say about who we believe God to be? What does it say about what we believe about human beings? What does it say about relationships? Then, I planned to ask them to define Post-Modern, highlighting where their ideas and my reading and understanding intersected. Finally, I would ask them to describe how they understood the difference between spiritual and religious.

For week two, we would move into trust building. We would begin in the same way, with an ice breaker as an avenue to telling our stories and a shared meal. For this icebreaker, I planned to ask them to tell a story about something that happened to them during the previous week. During the meal, we would dialogue about why so many conversations stay at the surface level and never go deep. We would also share ways we could create a safe, hospitable environment

to put people at ease and model being vulnerable ourselves to invite others into a vulnerable but safe place. I planned to ask them the following questions, loosely adapted from Eric H. F. Law's book:¹⁹ Complete the following sentence: I know I am respected when... Share your response and listen to others. Compare the different responses. What are some reasons behind the different perceptions of respect? What are your responsibilities for ensuring you are respected in this group? What are your responsibilities to ensure others are respected? What do others need to know about you for you to feel included? What steps can we take to ensure all feel heard, respected, and included?²⁰ Then, I decided to share with them Law's RESPECT model and give them copies as table tents to use as needed.²¹

Week three's session focused on dialogue facilitation. We would begin as usual with an icebreaker, where I proposed to ask them to share a story about their experience with the church. During the meal, I intended to briefly introduce Isaacs's "Behavior Necessary for Dialogue."²² Then, I planned to ask them to share some active and empathetic listening skills and some challenges to genuine dialogue. We would use role play to address a few of the challenges and practice the listening skills with each other. I also intended to talk about asking open-ended questions and model some statement questions versus some truly

¹⁹ Law, 120-122.

²⁰ See Appendix C for a listing of the questions.

²¹ See Appendix C.

²² Isaacs, 419. See Appendix C for my adaptation.

inquisitive questions. I would invite them to reflect on some questions we could ask our Gathering Group participants during the week and bring them the following week to share.

Finally, on week four, we would pull the pieces together. I planned to share a basic structure for the times, including icebreakers or storytelling time, conversation in response to conversation starter questions, ways to connect the conversation to their lives, and some sort of closing ritual, such as asking for challenges and celebrations that each faced, extinguishing a candle, a moment of silence, sharing the hand of friendship, etc. However, I proposed to invite them to think of this time organically, following the lead of the group and facilitating the experience rather than controlling it. We would talk about ways to recruit participants, including what to tell them about the project and getting the Informed Voluntary Consent form signed. Then, I planned to have us create some icebreakers and some conversation starting questions, including sharing the ones that they brought with them. We would also talk about ways we could incorporate the stories of scripture, by allowing them to arise naturally in response to the flow of the conversation. I intended to remind them that I designed the structure to be adaptable to their personalities, gifts, and circumstances, and invite them to trust the leading of the Spirit. As a closing blessing, I would pray over each leader, their gifts, the Gathering Groups which they would lead, and ask for the Spirit's guidance as we moved into phase two.

In phase two, the leaders would pair up and begin recruiting participants. We decided to invite the congregation to help us recruit people and got positive

feedback if not a lot of help. The leaders would gather participants and begin meeting for six to eight weeks. I intended for them to meet once weekly in various locations, including a home, coffee shop, restaurant, and online for about an hour, utilizing the structure and adapting it to their needs. The leaders would meet together again at my home after weeks two and six for a check-in and to offer support and encouragement to each other. I planned to ask leaders to bring verbatim-type descriptions of any challenges they faced, questions they had, or celebrations to share. In this way, the leaders would learn from each other's experience and shared each other's joy. After week six, I would also remind them to begin collecting stories and to prepare for the survey questions to help us evaluate the effectiveness of the groups, which comprised phase three. We would begin phase three with a celebration gathering of the leaders, to thank them and begin the evaluation process.

Phase three involved gathering the stories for evaluation through the use of the survey. We suggested that the leaders hand out the surveys to people the week before the final gathering and ask them to bring them back on the final gathering. At the final gathering, the group would share their responses to the questions as they felt comfortable. The participants could then either turn in their surveys or simply use them as part of the dialogue. The participant questions included: What did you hope to gain from this experience? In what ways was that hope realized? What has been your greatest experience in this Gathering? What challenges did you discover? How did the group overcome these challenges? How have you grown since participating in these Gatherings? What made you

continue? (Or, what made you stop participating?) Would you like for the group to continue? In what ways was this experience similar to what you think of church? In what ways was it different?²³

After gathering the stories and surveys, the team leaders would also gather to share the responses as a group. We invited them to share group narratives gathered during the process, to share personal narratives about their own spiritual growth through the process, and to share feedback with me as their leader. In sharing their own spiritual growth, I requested that they fill out a survey, including the following questions: What did you discover about relationships with people outside the church? How did these interactions impact your faith journey? What did we learn about being church from this experience? Where did you notice energy and interest from the participants? Where did you sense resistance or hostility? What transformations, changes, or growth did you observe in people and in the relationships? Were you able to build authentic relationships? What made them authentic? How did you see the relationships forming? In what ways were you able to share your faith?²⁴ I then proposed we gather to dialogue around these questions for two weeks or more, as needed.

Becoming Street Vendors—Taking It to the Streets

With our proposed plan in hand, we proceeded to invite leaders for these groups. My LAC created a list of potential people who we believed had the gifts we sought, with the intent of inviting them specifically if they did not respond to the invitation we issued in worship. On two successive Sundays in worship, I included the project in my message

²³ See Appendix D for a copy of the survey.

²⁴ See Appendix E for a copy of the survey.

and issued the invitation as a call to respond. I invited people to support the project in three ways: to pray for the project to spread God's love in Jesus to people outside the church; to participate in a leadership team to lead Gathering Groups to host dialogue sessions with people who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious"; and/or to help recruit participants for the Gathering Groups, inviting friends, neighbors, co-workers, or family, in other words, someone with whom you already had a relationship, to participate.²⁵

We had twelve people respond to the invitation, five of whom had been on our list. After explaining the project more deeply, four dropped out, leaving us with eight. In the training process, one additional leader discovered the timing did not work for him, so we ended up with seven leaders. One of the leaders, however, asked to run her Gathering Group online and felt she did not need a partner for that type of group.

Although the leaders knew one another from worship, the icebreakers provided time for us to get to know each other on a different level. I enjoyed watching them share and affirm their various stories. Moving to the table provided the transition time from the icebreakers into the "training" portion of the gathering. Again, I took pleasure in the give and take of the dialogue around the topic of the evening.

On the first week's topic, I discovered that many of the leaders had only a vague notion of Postmodern, so I needed to do a little more teaching there. As I explained some of the traits to them, however, I invited them to share how they saw that aspect lived out. The conversation became a little more animated when I encouraged them to reflect theologically on the project. We began with the assumption that God is already at work in

²⁵ See Appendix B for a copy of the hand-out.

the lives of those outside the church, loving them and drawing them into relationship. In this part of the conversation, someone mentioned baptism, and how I explain at every baptism that we baptize infants as a sign of God’s prevenient grace—that God is already reaching out to that child. The same prevenient grace would apply to those outside the church. I mentioned two scriptures that came to mind: Acts 17:28: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ . . .”²⁶ and Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.”²⁷ These conversations brought to mind panentheism: the idea that God lives in everything and everything is part of God.

We then talked about the fact that if God is in all, we have something to learn from those outside the church. Someone mentioned that Jesus often affiliated with those outside of the religious establishment and cared deeply for them. Another added that because we love God and want to be with God, we needed to care about people outside of ourselves. I stated that in this way we participate in God’s work wherever God is, by being in relationship with people whom God loves. Someone else celebrated that we focus on relationships instead of doctrine in this project, which would help people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious.

One of the leaders then asked how to respond to someone who says that they are spiritual but not religious. Someone suggested saying, “That describes me, too.” I recommended that for our project purposes, we could respond to people who identify themselves in this way by asking: What do you mean by religious or spiritual? How do you define these two terms? We then moved into a conversation about what the leaders

²⁶ Acts 17:28, NRSV.

²⁷ Psalm 24:1, NRSV.

thought these two terms meant. One leader said that religion is human-made rules and ritual separate from spirituality, which is our own internal sense of God. Another agreed, saying that spirituality seems like recognition of something beyond ourselves, something other, that we express appreciation to or for, or that makes us experience wonder. Religion, to them, felt based on rules expressed through an institution. Someone else said that we all have some type of spirituality, but we are not all religious.

One leader offered a different perspective. She said that we need both spirituality and religion. In her view, spirituality could become too self-focused if it is all about me and my beliefs. Religions, then, involved traditions that help us understand our spirituality by organizing our spiritual beliefs. Another agreed that both spirituality and religion contribute different things to our lives. To them, spirituality involved our own relationships; with ourselves, with others, with our world, and with God. Religion, then, determined how we practiced our spirituality, how we lived it out. In their view, we lived religion through our relationships. Religion, then, meant community. Throughout this conversation, people shared not only their understanding of spirituality and religion, but the stories behind their understanding, including how they grew up and interactions they have had with people both inside and outside the church. We practiced active listening skills, affirming each other and refraining from correcting or judging another's perspective.

Everyone enjoyed the dialogue greatly and returned the next week ready to jump right into the topic. I had to slow us down to include the icebreaker. During the meal, we talked about why conversations tend to stay on the surface and why we find it so hard to trust each other. Then, we brainstormed ways to create a hospitable environment, helping

people to feel safe and included. Someone mentioned modeling vulnerability, in other words, sharing your own story, as a way to help people open up. The conversation included quite a bit about judging others and how to avoid that tendency. We talked about how feeling threatened can lead to judging, and how God does not need our defense and neither does the church, so we can relax. Someone brought up that asking questions helps them keep their mind off of judging. We shared answers to the questions for setting ground rules and everyone liked the RESPECT model. Some of the ideas that arose during the conversation on respect included: not being judged or belittled, not being corrected, not ignoring or changing the subject, not rolling the eyes or turning away. People felt valued when others listened patiently and restated what they said, demonstrating that they listened, and engaged with them even if they disagreed. However, respect involved disagreeing in a gentle manner, not forcefully arguing or labeling either people or the idea. Finally, respect entailed the safety of knowing that your words would not be repeated, either to others outside of the group, or to harm you later in the conversation. Again, we captured the essence of the RESPECT model.

By the third week of the practice gathering, the leaders felt more confident in the process. Our icebreaker took us a bit deeper, as we reflected on an experience we had with church. Then, I shared with them the handout on “Behavior Necessary for Dialogue” and we talked about the various components, paying particular attention to listening. Some of the ideas that came up for practicing active listening included: using the Native American idea of a talking stick to take turns talking; repeating back or paraphrasing what someone said to gain clarification or validate their ideas; and asking follow up questions. We talked about how these follow up questions could help explore the non-

verbal aspects of communication, such as: “You really sounded sad when you mentioned that experience. What makes it hurt?” In addition to non-verbal communication, these follow up questions could help uncover feelings, values, and assumptions beneath the belief, such as: “You really seem threatened by that point-of-view. What do you think that other perspective says about your identity?” We encouraged each other to assume the role of investigator, discovering new things rather than trying to prove something.

In this session, we also dealt with some of the challenges that arise in dialogue. Again, posing questions helped us deal with challenges such as hitting someone’s hot buttons. However, questions would not help when one person dominates the conversation. Instead, leaders could summarize what the person said and then state: “Let’s hear from some others.” Another way one person could dominate the conversation arose when it became a counseling session focused on that person’s issues. We talked about handling that by saying: “I feel that this conversation is too important for the time we have here. Let’s meet together another time to talk about it.” Or, if something tragic happened in a person’s life, the leader could ask how the group could help. The final challenge to dialogue that came up in our dialogue happened when one person assumed the role of expert in the conversation. The group suggested responding with: “Right now we are simply exploring different people’s spirituality. Let’s refrain from judging or pronouncing something right or wrong and simply listen to the various points-of-view.” We role played some of these situations to practice not getting flustered in the moment, to become more aware of our listening habits and skills, and to practice using questions.

Our final training time also focused on questions as we came together to talk about an organic, adaptable structure and create icebreakers and conversation starting

questions. The leaders also had many questions around the recruiting of participants as this part of the process brought on the most anxiety. I encouraged them to network and just do the best they could, trusting God to lead people to their group who needed to participate. I also shared with them a flier that we could use to recruit people.²⁸ I made copies of the flier and invited people in church to pass them out and post them in places they visited.

As we conversed about the purpose of icebreakers, we mentioned that the early ones needed to be light in order to prevent forcing someone to share on a deeper level than they feel comfortable. The group came up with the following suggestions, reminding each that they could choose their own and did not need to use these: What is your favorite vacation spot and why is it your favorite? What are your hobbies? If money were no object, what would you choose for your profession? What was your best subject in school? Do you use it in your work today? Which holiday do you most enjoy and why? If you could be any animal, which one would you be? Why does that animal appeal to you? As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? What is your favorite sport to play? What is your favorite sport to watch? To which fairy tale or children's book character do you most relate and why? Describe your day in three words and then ask others what those three words say about who you are. Share a story about a childhood pet. In the creation process, we tried to avoid questions with simple answers and instead designed questions which would evoke stories or sharing a part of the personality. Again, the leaders designed these questions to be playful with the purpose of getting to know other people.

²⁸ See sample flier in Appendix A.

The next set of questions we designed had a different focus: to get spiritual conversations started. We talked about how any conversation can become spiritual with some intentionality and to go with the flow of the conversation. The icebreaker questions themselves might begin the conversation and the leaders would then not need to stop and ask the conversation starter questions. If, however, the conversation needed some guidance, the group designed the following questions: What are you hoping to talk about in this group? What do you bring to the group? What do you hope to get out of it? If you could talk about anything without fear, what would it be? What are some topics that you would like to talk about but don't have a place to discuss them? How do you define spirituality? How do you practice it? What do you like about your spirituality? What would you like to change or how would you like to grow? What kind of community would make you want to be a part of it? How would you describe God or your higher power? Describe a time when you felt God's presence. When do you feel close to God? Do you have any "lower powers" in your life that you struggle with and that draw you down? What about evil and suffering? How do you pray? What is prayer? Does heaven (an afterlife) exist? What might it be like? What was the message of Jesus? What's the message you hear from the church? What religious experiences have helped shape you? Did you grow up in church? What was your image of God as a child? Have you ever felt drawn out of yourself and especially connected to another person? Have you ever felt compelled to help someone, even if it inconvenienced you? What compelled you to do that? Talk about current events and finding God in the midst of it. Again, we did not design these questions to be asked like a survey, but rather to help get spiritual

conversations started or redirect conversations toward a spiritual topic. We closed this final training gathering with prayer and blessing as we sent each other out to be the seeds.

Although we had designed the program to meet after weeks two and six, we discovered scheduling conflicts for the meeting after week two. Instead, I contacted each of the leaders individually to find out how they were doing; then we met together in person for another meal after week six. The groups they recruited varied in size including eight online, six and five and three in groups meeting face-to-face. One pair of leaders decided to also run a “trial” group with their young adult children during a weeklong visit. They enjoyed this process very much as it allowed them to have spiritual conversations without their children fearing judgment or an ulterior motive. They simply saw it as conducting research for my project. The group leaders with only three in their group shared how meaningful their gatherings had been and described a palpable sense of God’s presence in the conversations. The woman who had started an online group demonstrated how the conversations took place in Facebook. She shared her frustration that although the group had gotten off to a wonderful start, the conversation began to falter and we brainstormed some ways to get it going again. We talked about the option of having an IM chat with the various participants at a designated time to see if that helped people feel more connected.

All of the other leaders shared how connected they felt and how they felt privileged to share people’s spiritual journeys with them. We met two final times to gather stories and share experiences as well as to review the survey answers, both from the participant survey and the leader survey. (We explore the findings in the next chapter.) On the final gathering, we shared desert as a way to “taste and see that the Lord

is good,”²⁹ and to celebrate the ending of an amazing journey. As I watched the excitement and joy of the leaders, I remembered a quote I had heard from Martin Buber: “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”³⁰ We had indeed become street vendors of authentic relationships, participating in the presence and compassion of God and experiencing the resulting electric joy.

²⁹ Psalm 34:8, NRSV.

³⁰ ThinkExist.com Quotations. “Martin Buber Quotes,” accessed 25 November 2009; available from http://thinkexist.com/quotes/martin_buber/; Internet.

CHAPTER 4

THE FEAST UNLEASHED: WHAT WE DISCOVERED

Two comments sum up well the attitudes of the participants and the Gathering Group leaders. One participant quoted an unknown source who said, “Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who have already been there.” She then described an experience where she had relapsed into her addiction and sought God and help in a church. The pastor simply told her that if she did not stop, she would go to hell, but he offered no other help. She felt as though she had gone to church looking for God and found only condemnation. However, in her Gathering Group, she discovered God’s presence and expressed gratitude. Her experience highlighted many common threads in the stories of those outside the church: fear of condemnation, rejection of doctrine, longing for a spiritual connection to God or a “higher power” and to others, and discovering that connection in the Gathering Groups.

The second comment came from one of the women who led this participant’s Gathering Group, remarking on how much she changed over the course of their meetings. She, like the other leaders, enjoyed witnessing God’s diversity in creating all people in the divine image. In this diversity, she experienced a depth of God’s love that she had not seen before and she felt in awe at serving as God’s presence for people outside the church. Through the process, she began asking herself as she approached each encounter:

“How can I get to know these people in such a way that my understanding of God can grow more truthful through these relationships?”

Both the participants and the leaders thoroughly enjoyed the process, as they developed relationships and experienced belonging in new ways. Because of the safe and comfortable environments that the leaders created and the positive experiences everyone had, we learned so much about those outside the church, about ourselves, about the nature of church itself, and even about God. The participants felt that their spiritual journeys had been heard, valued, and validated. Likewise, the leaders felt they had grown in their understanding of God, the church, and their participation in God’s mission to those outside the church.

An Oasis in the Desert

One Gathering Group leader stated that he felt that through this process we “offered cold water to people in the desert and they thirsted for it.”¹ His comment reminded me of the passage from Isaiah 55:

“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money!
Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it’s all free!
Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength?
Why pay for food that does you no good?
Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food.”²

In the view of the participants, organized religion or “church” had offered them food that did not give them strength, but fed them with fear instead. They felt choked by the required adherence to doctrine that did not feed their souls. Many had been hurt by the judgmental attitudes of church or church people and had run away into a desert. But

¹ Doug Roof, LAC member and Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

² Isaiah 55:1-2, NLT.

there, they felt their spirits dried out and needed a place of refreshment; they longed to find a banquet of the finest food. In the Gathering Groups, they established trust and built authentic relationships quickly and drank deeply of the acceptance and validation they found there. In the end, three of the four groups asked their leaders to share their own faith stories as a response to being listened to and cared for spiritually.

We had not anticipated the fear factor to play such a significant role in people's lives, but at least according to our participants, fear served as a huge barrier to getting involved in a church. This fear manifested itself in several ways. Some participants reacted to hypocrisy with fear. They felt that if people acted in different ways inside and outside the church building, then they could not figure out which way was true and which was false. This hypocrisy made it hard to develop trust because of a lack of consistent behavior. Of course, sadly, the Catholic Church's crises with the sexual misconduct of priests topped people's list as examples of church hypocrisy. These types of actions contributed to creating a church environment where people did not feel safe.

Another area where people's negative experiences of church fed their fear involved asking questions of their faith. Several participants expressed relief at being able to question beliefs in the Gathering Groups without fear of backlash. One participant described an experience where she questioned the Bible and her mother slapped her, yelling: "Who are you to question God's Word?"³ The opportunity to explore and ask questions without fear of judgment felt like an oasis in the desert.

Several participants also talked about the fear of eternal judgment that churches use to get people to behave certain ways. One said: "If you do not go to my sister-in-

³ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

law's church, you are not a Christian and you are going to hell.”⁴ Others had been condemned to hell by Christians for various reasons such as: dressing up on Halloween, struggling with addiction, supporting abortion rights, homosexuality, wearing makeup, working or shopping on Sunday, not believing certain doctrines, not reading the Bible daily, and not belonging to a particular brand of Christianity. These ultimate condemnations left the participants fearing constant judgment and fostered the attitude of “why try if I am not good enough anyway?” Again, the fears prevented people from pursuing their spiritual journeys.

Still others mentioned the power and politics that have shaped and misshaped Christianity as a reason to fear. One participant mentioned how much death has occurred because of people and their religion. Another agreed, saying: “Christianity has been the cause of so much suffering and pain. Talk about Muslim extremism? Let's look at Christianity!”⁵ These comments about politics referred not only to political parties, but also to power plays and politics inside churches. One participant claimed: “When I go into a church, within ten minutes I can tell who the ‘Big Wig’ is, whom everyone bows down to, and it is not Jesus Christ.”⁶ Another told the story of her hurt from politics within the church. After participating in religious schooling and parish worship for over 25 years, this woman got divorced. Her priest informed her that for a fee of several hundred dollars she could have her marriage absolved, but that she would never be able

⁴ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁵ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁶ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

to participate in communion again.⁷ Participants identified politics as one of the reasons why they cannot talk about spirituality with their friends.

They also identified fear as a control tool or motivational factor. Several talked about how human societies had created religion to “control the masses,” especially before these societies established laws to provide stability and control. Others mentioned how churches use fear to motivate people to do good things, threatening not just with hell, but also with shunning or exclusion from community. One author, in a book on Ignatian spirituality for women, described the role of fear as: “a fall-back motivator for virtuous living when love alone is not enough.”⁸ Before we can truly establish relationships with people outside the church, we must be willing to acknowledge their fears.

This fear spilled over into a way of enforcing doctrinal beliefs. Many participants struggled with not only what the doctrines held, but also with the way in which the church enforced uniformity of belief. Most people identified church as being a one-way conversation instead of a dialogue. One participant acknowledged that she could still grow in that way, even though it limited how much growth could occur. In responding to a question on the survey about how the Gathering Group experience compared to church, she responded: “Church allows us to grow but mostly with our reaction to what we are told without the ability to ask or comment. Church services are growth within ourselves,

⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader from an online participant named Karen.

⁸ Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 170.

limited to our own perspective. That's fine, but an interchange of perspective can create a change or a deepening of one's spiritual and religious being."⁹

Other participants did not give the church as much grace as she did. One expressed that he enjoyed the Gathering Group process since it had the energy and community of Christianity without the "constriction of their mental and literal autonomy."¹⁰ He further commented: "Churches generally have a prescribed program and set of beliefs to administer, which aren't ever really discussed or questioned. I think this alienates many actively and free-thinking individuals who may want to believe (or at least participate) but have real legitimate reservations."¹¹

Still others became downright hostile when talking about doctrine or belief systems. One answered the question about how the Gathering Group compared to church: "It was in NO WAY similar to what I think of as church. I seriously doubt that any church would debate or entertain my divergent thoughts on the matters discussed. Churches are united by a common religious/spiritual theme. I cant' see how group discussions like ours could come about in a forum where the group has like-minded views on religion/spirituality."¹² Another participant answered the same question, saying Gathering Groups were different from church because "gathering is open discussion eliminating the dogmatic aspect of organized religion."¹³ Ironically, though, one group at

⁹ See Appendix D for survey responses.

¹⁰ See Appendix D for survey responses.

¹¹ See Appendix D for survey responses.

¹² See Appendix D for survey responses.

¹³ See Appendix D for survey responses.

least struggled amongst themselves to define terms and agree upon certain definitions.¹⁴ Although this struggle may remind Christians of the struggle to name or define God as attempted through doctrine, those outside the church perceive doctrine as more rigid and less dialogical.

Several Gathering Group leaders commented on this theme of perceived uniformity of thoughts and beliefs in church. The participants experienced doctrine not as an effort to describe the indescribable, but as mandatory beliefs that all people had to assent to in order to belong. (This idea refers back to the pattern shift Phyllis Tickle described, moving from “believe-behave-belong” to “belong-behave-believe.”¹⁵ The participants thought they had to believe and behave a certain way before they could belong. But, our Gathering Groups tried to help people experience belonging first.) Participants thought that religions kept “people comfortable because they tell people how to perceive the world.”¹⁶ They resisted anyone trying to convince them of things where they had divergent opinions. Initially, some participants hesitated to fully participate in the Gathering Groups because they wanted to ensure they were not going to be “sold” a set of beliefs.¹⁷

In fact, the leaders identified this area of doctrine as one generating the most hostility. One leader stated: “I sensed resistance or hostility when they talked about the

¹⁴ See Appendix D for survey responses.

¹⁵ Tickle, 159.

¹⁶ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

¹⁷ See Appendix E for survey responses.

church's structure and rules. These spurred a sense of negativity which then spilled over into our discussion of childhood experiences in the church."¹⁸ We in the church do not comprehend the depth of profound hurt the church has inflicted on others and the resistance to God that results. I remember one older gentleman in a previous church who refused to come to communion. One day, when he lay in the hospital, I asked if he wanted communion and he told me his story. As a young child, he and his mother visited a church for the first time. When they went forward to receive communion, the priest, in front of everyone present, berated the boy and his mother for allowing him to come to communion. He experienced that as a rejection by God and never had the courage to come to communion again until on his death bed. Several leaders acknowledged hearing similar painful stories of how churches had hurt the participants in their groups, especially as churches emphasized doctrine over relationships. Any genuine effort to reach out to people who have been hurt by the church must involve some sort of recognition of their legitimate wounds. Admitting our brokenness would go a long way toward establishing trust with people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious.

Yet, despite the negative experiences some people had with church, many experienced the on-going presence of God in their lives and developed their own spirituality as a result. One woman claimed that God had never left her even though the church had abandoned her. God helped her find a way: "I don't believe God judges us, so we don't have to pretend. I poured my heart and soul out to a pastor when I needed help. I got a lecture on how God didn't make you live like this. Keep it up and you are going to hell. That's not what I needed to hear. I was looking for help and received condemnation.

¹⁸ See Appendix E for survey responses.

Afterwards, I went out and got high. I eventually got help from a group of loving women who loved me until I could love myself, and I started the 12 steps.”¹⁹ She understood this process as part of God’s plan for her life and, in recovery, she rediscovered a loving God.

Another participant shared the understanding that he did not have to be part of a church to practice spirituality. In fact, he believed spirituality to be intimate and felt he did not need to share it with a large group of people. He stated: “I would not be comfortable sharing my thoughts and beliefs with a church, nor do I feel comfortable listening to a large group of people share their thoughts with me.”²⁰ For him, spirituality seemed best expressed in a smaller, more intimate group. But, he did not state that spirituality involved isolation.

In fact, for many of the participants, spirituality brought a feeling of connectedness, to God, to nature, to other people, and this feeling led to a way of living, not simply beliefs. Several described a strong feeling of that indescribable connection with God, although one person chose to describe that connection as to a source: “I think we all try to connect with our source; all religions speak to that...God and good come from the same source. I prefer the word, source, over the word, God.”²¹ Still another talked about being connected to a greater good and about recognizing that God is not separate from people.²² Nature also came up as a place where people felt spiritually

¹⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

²⁰ See Appendix D for survey responses.

²¹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

²² Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

connected: “Spirituality to me is feeling that I am part of the earth and feeling that all things are connected.”²³

More than anything else, however, participants described feeling spiritually connected with other people. One participant stated: “I think there are three things needed in life: living in service to others, feeling and celebrating thanks, and community. I have these things without church.”²⁴ Another participant in his group added to that sentiment: “I might be missing an exchange of spiritual energy by not having a structured spiritual community. It’s one thing to have your own spirituality, but people, being social beings, might be spiritually, soulfully, energetically stimulated by like-minded people.”²⁵ Even a participant who struggled with the concept of God, felt spirituality connected him to others. He described telling people: “I’ll keep you in my thoughts. I think if you pray for something and don’t get it, did God cause that?”²⁶ Even though he believed in more of a “higher power,” he felt the need to express a compassionate connection with others in need.

This connection with others led the participants to live their spirituality more than believe it. One online participant stated: “Spirituality is every day, every breath, everything. It is how I choose to live my life, particularly the way I treat myself and others.”²⁷ For several, that way of treating others found expression through the Golden

²³ Reported by Gathering Group Leader from an online participant.

²⁴ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

²⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader from an online participant.

Rule. For others it involved actively seeking to do something good for others, living more for others than for yourself. One person reflected this sentiment: “Do unto others, the Golden Rule. I want to be around good people. I want to do good to others. I want to teach my children to do the same.”²⁸ Even conversations about death and an afterlife simply led to thoughts about how we live life here and now, not focusing on a reward or punishment in the future but in relationships lived here on earth. Another participant reiterated the Golden Rule and right living: “I believe in a simplified Golden Rule...if you don’t hurt anybody else, you’re doing the right thing, no matter whether your actions come from beliefs or not...I like to think that I’m living right, and that if there is a God, he’ll understand me.”²⁹ Again, people seemed to long for right living, right relationships, instead of right beliefs.

Yet the participants did hold strong beliefs about God and Jesus. For many, trying to define God proved an impossible task. How do you describe the limitless? One participant stated: “Any attempt to describe God places limits. No organized religion should try it. God by nature is indefinable; God has no limits. God gets used as the common convention sees fit.”³⁰ Another went further, saying: “It is arrogant to presume we know God.”³¹ Although they did not negate an experience of God, they expressed doubt about the ability to know God and to know what God wants. The participants found

²⁸ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

²⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

³⁰ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

³¹ Ibid.

the mystery of God not frightening, but reassuring, as they experienced a God of depth who could not be limited to literal facts.

To them, then, church emphasized the literal facts instead of the amazing mystery of God, taking away some of God's wonder. Different participants defined this "downsizing" of God in different ways. Some described how religion or church put human characteristics on God, thus reducing God to some super-hero human.³² Others talked about how church people blamed God instead of taking responsibility for their behavior,³³ especially when suffering became involved. Interestingly, the problem of suffering did not seem to matter much to the participants. Instead, they seemed to accept it as part of life. But, they expressed frustration when people used God to absolve themselves of getting involved in suffering. Like suffering, death seemed to them just a part of life, a mystery, not something to fear, but a "transfer of energy."³⁴

While participants preferred to understand God as mystery, they also commented that the divinity of Jesus had been overemphasized to the detriment of his humanity. As I reflected on this comment, I thought about the images of Jesus depicting his "otherness" and even his sinlessness, but not his humanity. Even when I considered popular Christmas carols, I thought about the distance they create between us and Jesus, such as "Away in a Manger" whose second verse presents Jesus as "the perfect baby:" "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes. But, little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." This "otherness" took away an important characteristic of the human Jesus: he lived a life as a

³² Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

vulnerable human being who needed others, just as we depend on others. For one participant in particular, the divinity of Jesus took away any reason to strive to be like him. He stated: “When I run now, I think about our Sunday night questions. Last week, I heard that Jesus was really human. I’ve always seen him as being more divine and therefore I’ve thought it impossible to be like him. Why try if you can’t do it?”³⁵

However, most participants viewed Jesus very positively. Jesus helped them live a life of gratitude. Jesus offered forgiveness and took away their shame, even though they struggled with the whole concept of how atonement worked, questioning a God who would demand a human sacrifice for sin. Interestingly, even the participants who had never participated in church knew enough about the story of Jesus to understand and appropriate for themselves the forgiveness he offers. Unfortunately, they saw his message as counter to what the church offers:

Jesus was the ultimate nonconformist but the Catholic Church is about conformity so I don’t see Jesus in the church...I love the message of Jesus which is love thy neighbor, help others, do not judge...It’s a great message. The church contradicts that in so many ways.³⁶

A participant in the same group combined the positive view of Jesus with a positive view of humanity: “Jesus came to save us from our sin but not to save us from being human. We need to have someone to go to for love and comfort and that is person is Jesus.”³⁷ She introduced another topic that found frequent reference: being created in God’s image and what that means. Participants believed that God created humanity in the divine image,

³⁵ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

³⁶ Ibid..

³⁷ Ibid.

even if they struggled to define it, and that therefore, humanity was good. Again, they saw this belief as contradictory to the church's teachings on the complete depravity of humankind, but they affirmed that this divine image came from God.

Because of their positive attitudes toward God and Jesus and in spite of their negative attitudes toward church, the participants willingly opened themselves up to this process. During the Gatherings, they shared openly and honestly, eager to tell their stories and pleasantly surprised by the validation they found of their own spiritual journeys. Many found that they expanded their own minds and hearts to other people's ideas, feelings, and experiences with regards to spirituality. In the process, they also learned how to dialogue. One person stated it well: "We listened attentively more and resisted expressing every rising thought, let[ting] some go."³⁸ Another participant wrote: "I learned to listen to others' beliefs without passing judgment."³⁹ Still another said: "The accepting, open-minded attitude of the group members made me want to continue to come."⁴⁰ One Gathering Group Leader also noticed this dynamic among his group's members: "They remained engaged for six weeks and they definitely grew in respect for each other."⁴¹ As the Leaders modeled this non-judgmental listening, the participants began to mimic that behavior, creating a safe atmosphere where people could share openly and honestly.

³⁸ See Appendix D for survey responses.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Appendix E for survey responses.

Once they began to share in this way, the participants discovered how much they longed for such a community. One participant described the process as “stimulating and cathartic...I find the discussion of religious/spiritual and related matters continually interesting and even therapeutic. Airing questions, dilemmas, somehow diffuses them, even if we don’t resolve them.”⁴² Another participant talked about how the process helped her realize how much she enjoyed talking with people about her spirituality and that in the process, she discovered that she needed more spiritual strength.⁴³ One of the Gathering Group Leaders recalled a participant stating: “This isn’t the kind of thing you can bring up at a cocktail party.”⁴⁴ Another Leader commented that her participants constantly expressed gratitude for the chance to “tell their side of the story.”⁴⁵ This need to tell the stories and be heard resonated with another Leader as he described the process: “There was clearly a desire to be heard by others in a safe environment, and this appeared to be ‘good for the soul’ for several.”⁴⁶ One participant broadened the implications of this type of sharing and listening, saying: “If countries could do what we are doing here, there would not be war!”⁴⁷

Sharing and listening to each others’ stories helped to build a sense of community. One Gathering Group Leader commented on her group: “People have a common need to

⁴² See Appendix D for survey responses.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

express what they feel and a need to be heard and a need for connection through dialogue.”⁴⁸ Participants echoed that sense of connection. One stated: “I leave feeling really good; most people like us feel isolation.”⁴⁹ Another person in her group agreed: “I have talked about participating in this group to at least six people this month. They were all so excited...It’s nice to talk without judgment.”⁵⁰ A woman in a different group stated it differently: “This is so cool—being able to discuss spiritual stuff outside of church.”⁵¹ While conversing about this result, one member of the LAC made a strong personal connection with the power of these types of conversations: “I used to have spiritual conversations with a prior girlfriend. They were so deep and arose organically. It was a spiritual connection I’ve never had and it made me feel so alive and really able to question everything.”⁵² Clearly, this process tapped into an unmet need of people outside of church for an accepting community environment to explore their spirituality.

As my LAC and I teased out our learning from this process, one member asked how the Leaders established trust so quickly to create an accepting community. One participant gave credit to the Leaders for creating this atmosphere: “Our leaders set an environment where we all felt comfortable voicing our opinions on these delicate matters.”⁵³ The Leaders identified that establishing relationships first gave people a sense

⁴⁸ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁴⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁵² Reported by an LAC member at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁵³ See Appendix D for survey responses.

of comfort where they could be open to trusting. Then, setting the ground rules became important for creating this atmosphere of trust. The Leaders pointed to their role not as conversation participants but as listening facilitators, that enabled them to stay focused on deepening the relationships. They allowed any and all questions and they asked open-ended questions to try to listen and understand. When people attacked the church, the Leaders did not try to defend the church, but instead asked clarifying questions. The Leaders stated that they did not feel the need to defend the church or participate because they had already participated through our experiential training Gathering Group. By shifting the focus of the group from a dogmatic approach of answering questions to living with the questions, they discovered that they moved from anxiety to peacefulness. The participants, then, picked up the cues from the Leaders and also entered the conversation without judgment or a need to convince others of their rightness.

The participants also learned how to live with the questions. One woman found the courage to resume her search for a church because of this permission to question:

I discovered it was okay to keep questioning, that there were no “right” answers. I thought the church told me not to question, but now I believe there might be a place for me in a church if I am allowed to question. I was always afraid of being “wrong,” but now I feel reassured that the way I am practicing my faith is okay. Now I can look back on my life and see God at work and realize that God never left my side.⁵⁴

She found hope in the fact that she could continue her search and questioning could be a legitimate part of that search. She also highlighted the amount of serious self-reflection that most of the participants demonstrated. Another person commented that the seriousness of the topics evoked introspection: “I needed to look within myself to

⁵⁴ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

examine my attitudes thoroughly. The prerequisite self-examination was good for me...I have grown more aware of myself and why I feel the way I do on the subject of religion and spirituality.”⁵⁵ They had learned to do as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.⁵⁶

As they grew to “live the question,” the participants discovered a validation of their own spiritual journeys. They also learned how to value and encourage one another’s journeys. One Leader shared that a participant in their group “discovered that my spirituality is worthy of sharing with others.”⁵⁷ As we reflected on statement, we wondered how the church had contributed to the person’s idea that their journey was not worthy of sharing. Another Leader responded that so many people had been hurt by religion and by not being allowed to ask questions of their faith. “But when they saw that Christian people really cared about what they think, it gave their spiritual journeys value.”⁵⁸

These Gathering Groups, then, as depicted by one of my LAC members, became a bridge for some people to God and to the faith community. One participant decided as a result of her experience to renew her search for a spiritual home in church. Another

⁵⁵ See Appendix D for survey responses.

⁵⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by Joan M. Burnham (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 35.

⁵⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

person, by the end of the Gathering Group sessions, had discovered that he did believe in Jesus. His Leader quoted him: “Jesus is the essence of the Supreme Being. Jesus changed the world because of forgiveness. I have searched all over, but Christianity is my home. I’ve witnessed healing taking place, so for me, it is real.”⁵⁹ His unrehearsed excitement over this new self-discovery really touched the heart of the Leader, as he had the privilege to observe a thirsty person drinking deeply from the well of God’s love in Jesus.

By listening and caring for the souls of those outside the church, the Leaders offered cold water to thirsty people. This gift transformed some of the participants, such as one described by a Leader: “As she shared her life experiences and saw our love through listening, she shifted from a punishment mentality of God based on performance to one of grace.”⁶⁰ The participants responded by asking for more—they wanted to hear the stories of the Leaders. Three of the four groups asked the Leaders to share their own stories, indicating an openness to hearing the Christian story. The Christian story, however, needed to be not doctrine or even plain scripture, but the story of how following Jesus and being involved in a faith community impacted the lives of the Leaders, how the Living Water refreshed their own lives in particular.

The Bearers of the Living Water

The Gathering Group Leaders offered cold water to those in the desert and discovered the paradox of ministry in the process: as they fed others their own souls felt nourished as well. The Leaders enjoyed building relationships with those outside of the church through the stories shared. Through these stories, they experienced a depth of

⁵⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁶⁰ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

God's diversity and love that they had not seen. The Leaders appreciated having participated in a practice group first, but adapted the model to fit their own gifts and personalities as well as the dynamics of the group. In the process, they experienced a sense of awe at serving as God's presence for people.

All of the Leaders enjoyed the opportunity to deepen relationships with people outside of the church by listening to their stories. They discovered again the power of story to foster a sense of belonging. One Leader stated: "I had forgotten the power of story to build bonds and make us feel like we belong. Participating in this group reminded me of that power."⁶¹ These stories enriched the faith of the Leaders as they experienced anew the diversity of God's creation. Another Leader expressed it well: "People outside the church have their own special stories and quests...I enjoyed listening to the conversations—they impacted me with their knowledge and willingness to share. My faith has been enriched by their sharing."⁶² The Leaders attributed the development of authentic relationships to this honest, open story-telling and mutual respect in hearing one another's stories. One Leader shared: "I think the relationships were authentic because the format was participatory and not 'me-focused' or advocacy-based. Instead, we shared common experiences and became vulnerable to each other and in the process learned something about ourselves."⁶³ Creating a place for these authentic relationships to emerge allowed people to feel a sense of belonging that provided them the safety to explore their own stories and listen with their hearts to the stories of others.

⁶¹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁶² See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁶³ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

A couple of Leaders shared a temptation to think that those outside the church had not given serious thought to spiritual matters or their own spiritual journeys. Their experience listening to the stories convinced them otherwise. Even though some of the participants used language from other religions, such as Buddhism, they expressed similar longings and desires for life and seemed to live “good” lives. One Leader described her awakening process: “I had to step back and say, ‘Whoa...there are others outside the church who may have it more together than you!’”⁶⁴ She went on to say: “Just because you attend church regularly, know your Bible, volunteer your time, give your money, talk the talk, love God, and surround yourself with others who have the same beliefs...does not mean that you are the only one who ‘gets it.’”⁶⁵ This same Leader exclaimed with joy in one of our meetings: “God is revealed through some of these people who are ‘unchurched’ and I did not expect it!”⁶⁶ Instead of feeling threatened by different beliefs, Leaders felt called to reexamine their own beliefs and discovered that accepting other people’s spiritual experiences actually validated their own. God opened the minds and hearts of the Leaders in the process to see the Spirit’s work in the lives of people who may not fit their understanding of how to practice spirituality, yet who nonetheless lived their spirituality.

Along the way, the Leaders’ understanding of who God is and how God acts in the world broadened and deepened and this resulted in a greater capacity to love. One Leader explained: “I gained a deeper understanding of and appreciation for my beliefs

⁶⁴ See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

without passing judgment on other's different belief or non-belief. The stories enriched my life and I have greater love for other people now."⁶⁷ Another Leader described a highlight of the process for her as realizing the fullness of the mystery of God: "A highlight was discovering that the God I love and worship is the same God as others even if they can't name God as such."⁶⁸ Still another Leader portrayed her experience of coming to appreciate God's love more: "God became much bigger for me though this process...I gained a deep and profound sense of God's love for each of us, accepting each of us where we are."⁶⁹ Unwittingly, we uncovered another paradox: by sharing God's love with others, we gain a deeper awareness of God's love for us.

The Leaders noted that the practice group that we used for training helped them discover the diversity of God's creation and love before they had to model it as Leaders. Several evenings as we shared stories, people's eyes filled with tears at the pain of the story or the depth of God's love. We also witnessed firsthand how even Christians hold such diverse views on topics. The Leaders felt this experiential training prepared them for the diversity they found in their Gathering Groups and allowed them to accept it without feeling threatened. Although they heard many criticisms of the church and Christianity, the Leaders did not feel the need to defend the church because of their role as listeners and because of the practice group. One Leader expressed it well: "We lived it before we facilitated it. We came up with questions and already had the opportunity to discuss it, so

⁶⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

we had already been heard. Then, we did not feel the need to weigh in ourselves on the conversation.”⁷⁰

This process allowed them to focus on listening, which communicated their love and God’s love to the participants in very powerful ways. One Leader recounted a participant telling her: “Although the two of you were not part of the dialogue, I definitely felt love and sensitivity flowing from you.”⁷¹ People in each of the groups expressed gratitude for being given a voice. The Leaders understood this listening as a way to share their faith: “We shared our faith by offering love, hospitality, and listening. People saw God in that.”⁷² They also saw a real need for people to be heard in this way and therefore recognized the value of their gift of listening. One Leader stated: “Where in our society do we have the place to sit and talk about deep subjects, subjects of the heart? I think this was the value of these small groups.”⁷³ By offering a listening heart to others, the Leaders got a sense of God at work in and through them. One Leader summed up that feeling well: “This experience deepened my relationship with God. I used to struggle with feeling worthy, but I really got the sense of God in me and God working through me, which gave me a deeper understanding of who God is.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁷¹ See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁷² Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

The Leaders' experience reminded me of a line from the Prayer of St. Francis: "For it is in giving that we receive."⁷⁵ By giving of their time, their listening ears, and their caring hearts, the Leaders offered cold water to people in the desert. In the process, they discovered their own thirst and God quenched it as well.

The Fountain of Living Water: The Nature of the Church

Although the participants and Leaders alike thoroughly enjoyed the Gathering Group process and experienced God's presence in their midst, drinking deeply of the Living Water, neither group identified the process as being anything like church, which serves as a fountain for that Living Water. Most of the participants equated church with doctrine and uniformity of belief and all of the negative experiences that they have had with church or church people. The Leaders initially equated church with worship. However, after further reflection and conversation on the survey question about what we learned about "being church" from this experience, the Leaders broadened their understanding of what it means to be church, serving as aqueducts to take the Living Water out into the world.

Unfortunately, the participants did not understand church as water-distributor, but water keeper and purifier. When asked how their experience in the Gathering Groups was similar to church, most of them answered that it was not at all like church. They described church as having a "prescribed program and set of beliefs to administer,"⁷⁶ or a

⁷⁵ The Prayer Guide. "Prayer of St. Francis," accessed 8 December 2009; available from <http://www.prayerguide.org.uk/stfrancis.htm>; Internet.

⁷⁶ See Appendix D for survey responses.

place where “the group has like-minded views on religion/spirituality.”⁷⁷ In this forum, they believed divergent viewpoints could not co-exist. Another participant described the Gathering Groups: “It wasn’t at all like church. It had a divergence of beliefs, respect for the divergence, and no structure.”⁷⁸ The participants viewed church not only as people who shared the same beliefs but also who did not respect those whose beliefs differed from their own.

They did, however, understand the human nature of church. When asked if they could create a church that they might participate in, many stated that they would not create a church. One participant summed it up: “It’s hard to create a church without doing all those things we don’t like.”⁷⁹ Sadly, their experiences of being condemned by churchgoers and the portrayal of churches in the media affected both how they understood church and how open they would be to participation in church. Although it might be tempting for those of us inside the church to dismiss their views as negative stereotypes, our Leaders discovered just how powerfully these ideas impacted the participants and their willingness to engage in anything which they might deem “churchy.”

Not all of the participants had negative ideas about what church could or should be. Two common positive themes arose when they described church: a gathering to discuss spiritual topics and a community. One participant noted that the Gathering Groups were similar to church in that “we all believe in God and use prayer in our

⁷⁷ See Appendix D for survey responses.

⁷⁸ See Appendix D for survey responses.

⁷⁹ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

lives.”⁸⁰ Another participant stated that similarity as: “A few individuals gathered to discuss thoughts on a higher power.”⁸¹ They enjoyed having a safe forum to dialogue about their beliefs and expressed a desire for churches to offer more opportunities for that conversation and community.

The need for community came up several times. One person defined church as: “structured spirituality within a community organization.”⁸² However, the participants identified a longing for small communities, where they could explore their spiritual experiences and thoughts, enjoy the relationships of community, and serve others. They wanted a place where they could be authentically themselves and share life with others. One Leader remembered a participant defining a good church: “Any good church requires relationship and vulnerability, with the recognition that we don’t have all the answers.”⁸³ The willingness of people to participate in the Gathering Group process demonstrated openness to aspects of church, such as a safe place to dialogue, share spiritual experiences, and build relationships, while remaining closed to other perceived aspects of church, such as uniformity of belief.

The Leaders’ willingness to facilitate the Gathering Groups also demonstrated openness to understanding church in a new way. At first, when we talked about church, the Leaders tended to define it in terms of worship only. They mentioned the difference between the one-way conversation of worship and this dialogical process. However, as

⁸⁰ See Appendix D for survey responses.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁸³ Ibid.

we began to explore their answers to how this process helped us “be” the church, we uncovered more depth in understanding the nature of church, especially appreciating the mobile and relational aspect of “being” church instead of “going to” church.

Initially as we dialogued about being church, the conversation centered on the intellectual pursuit of ideas. Church, one Leader said, gave people “a particular vocabulary to name the spiritual experiences we are having.”⁸⁴ Leaders described the Gatherings as a forum to discuss these topics: “a place, process for the interaction of thoughts about important life topics of a spiritual nature.”⁸⁵ They identified the groups more with Sunday school or small groups instead of “church.” These groups, then, tended to be more accountable than church, requiring more participation and vulnerability than what they perceived worship demanded.⁸⁶

The interaction required in these relationships changed people in ways the Leaders thought church did not. One Leader stated: “These groups gave people a unique opportunity because people have a common need to express what they feel and a need to be heard and a need for connection through dialogue. In the dialogue process, people changed.”⁸⁷ By facilitating this need for connection, the Leaders discovered that they became the church. One Leader described what she learned about being church: “We are a support system and willing listeners, compassionate about others’ journeys.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁸⁵ See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁸⁶ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at May 6, 2009 meeting.

⁸⁷ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁸⁸ See Appendix E for survey responses.

This comment demonstrated the turn outward from nurturing our own spiritual journeys in church to being church by nurturing others, even those outside the church and in places outside the church. In this way, relationships became foundational to the Leaders' understanding of church. One Leader stated: "Church still represents two or more gathering together to acknowledge, love, and honor God, ourselves, and each other. Church IS relationship."⁸⁹ As we explored the idea of church as relationship, the Leaders began to understand that church could then be anywhere we go. The same Leader commented in one of our meetings: "For me, it is more important to be available for church wherever I am or whenever the opportunity presents itself."⁹⁰ Another Leader explained that for her, church happened by being God's presence for others: "Church can be anywhere where we can be God's presence and learn what people need and give them active and empathetic and non-judgmental listening."⁹¹

Listening without judgment and accepting people evoked for participants the presence of God's love and a way to practice their spirituality. One group invited me to join them after their final Gathering so that they could ask questions and could speak directly with me. At this Gathering, one woman described her participation with Special Olympics as one of the ways that she lives out her spirituality. One of the Leaders responded with a story of an event from worship a year or so ago. A teenager in our church, named Dian, has Down Syndrome and her mother had recently died in a

⁸⁹ See Appendix E for survey responses.

⁹⁰ Reported by Gathering Group Leader at April 29, 2009 meeting.

⁹¹ Ibid.

horseback riding accident. Although Dian had not lived with her mother, she felt very upset at her death and cried throughout the worship service. When my co-pastor husband, Bo, got up to pray, she ran onto the worship platform with him. Bo hugged her and invited her to share her hurt with the community. Through her sobbing and in sometimes difficult to understand language, Dian expressed her heart. Bo invited the congregation into prayer for her and for all those who grieved. Afterwards, Dian hugged Bo, raised her hands, and offered a blessing to the community. One of the participants of this Gathering responded to the story by saying: “Now *that’s* church.” Her Leader replied: “Yes! It is not a place or a set pattern of prayers or doctrine. It is an experience of God’s love in relationship.”⁹²

Although the participants did not seem to have their idea of church changed through this process, they did enjoy having a place to explore and deepen their spiritual experiences. They identified small groups of caring relationships where they could share their spiritual journey as something which would nourish them and in some ways serve as church. The Leaders, on the other hand, expanded their understanding of what it means to be the church through this process. They changed from thinking that the church remained external to them to recognizing the relational aspects of church to even seeing how they incarnate the church themselves. This shift involved both a turn from an inward focus to an outward focus, and a transition from church as something that they belong to or attend to accepting their responsibility to participate in the very mission of God for the church by serving as God’s presence and being the church wherever they went. They had

⁹² See Appendix F for notes from May 7, 2009 meeting.

listened for God in the heart of others and in the process become God's presence for others; together they discovered the finest food of all in relationship.

CHAPTER 5
THE FEAST GOES ON: THE IMPACT ON MY MINISTRY,
SKYLINE UMC, AND THE LARGER CHURCH

During the time of my doctoral studies, my family unexpectedly became a foster family. We received a call one cold Saturday night in January 2008 from the Delaware Division of Family Services, asking if we could take in two teenagers. Their mother, a member of our church, had stopped taking her medication for Bi-Polar Disorder and become abusive and violent. They assured us that it would be temporary, a week or ten days. The son returned to his mother after five months, but the daughter remains with us to this day. Since then, we have become official foster parents and have provided a home for five additional children, one of whom lives with us still. Throughout this experience, we have discovered just how much we have to give, even when we feel empty or when the kitchen seems empty. God has provided abundantly during this time.

God provided for us most especially during the first few months with two additional mouths to feed by sending us help through other people. Our church Single's Group offered the first help and began what they called, "the Gordy-Stith Beverage Delivery System." I had commented that we normally drank four gallons of milk each week, but with two additional kids we went through seven gallons of milk. They created

a week-long rotation where someone delivered milk to our door every day of the week and orange juice three days a week. Although they have discontinued that delivery system, their gift changed the way I view a gallon of milk as I look beyond the jug and see God feeding Elijah through ravens in 1 Kings 17 or God offering milk without cost in Isaiah 55's feast of finest food.

I also saw this beverage delivery system as a metaphor: people taking food out of the church to the streets to nourish hungry people instead of asking people to come into the church to receive it. As the people in the Single's Group felt nourished by each other and the church, they then took milk out to feed others. As we received that gift, we shared it with our foster children and then with their mother. When she healed, she began sharing what she had with neighbors in need. Like ripples on a pond after a stone hits the water, the gift spread from person to person feeding and nourishing both body and spirit. Our project also caused ripples of hope to spread, impacting my ministry, our church and community, and potentially the larger church, as the feast of the ministry of listening goes on through people carrying the milk of God's love into their everyday lives and passing it along in daily encounters.

The Appetizer: What I Learned about Myself and My Ministry

In the first chapter, I related a story of meeting with a Gathering Group where I outlined my hope for the project. I hoped to deepen our relationships with God through interacting with others whom God created, to provide a place to share our spiritual journeys through stories, and to experience community and the presence of Jesus in these Gatherings. As I reflected on what I learned about myself in this process, I noticed that I

realized the fulfillment of this hope. I did deepen my relationship with God by appreciating and participating in God's on-going creativity. Through this collaboration with God, I discovered that I could create an organic structure that provided enough boundaries but maximized flexibility to allow other people to adapt it and make it their own as the Leaders used their creativity to shape the Gathering Groups and create a safe haven for others. By listening to the stories of the Gathering Groups, I learned just how much my heart longs to include those who feel marginalized for any reason, and that listening had become for me a spiritual exercise. I also discovered how much I enjoy sharing my own experiences by building teams and empowering people to share in this ministry of listening. All of these experiences took place in relationship and I came to appreciate again the time and energy relationships demand but also the rewards of living in community.

God first drew me into the community of the Trinity through the gracious invitation to collaborate with the on-going creative divine activity. I often thought of creativity as manifesting itself only through the arts and therefore minimized my creative efforts by limiting them to music. However, I came to appreciate the ways God created opportunities through me and my work. By designing the process for the Gathering Groups, I helped create an atmosphere where community could emerge through the sharing of spiritual stories. Part of that creativity involved the ability to integrate many disparate ideas into one process, a gift that I had not noticed before this project. I enjoyed considering the various aspects of community and ways to coax that fragile life to emerge, and in the process I experienced God's presence by serving as that conduit.

While creating a safe haven for people to share their spiritual stories, I discovered how to set clear boundaries for the Leaders while allowing flexibility for them to use their own natural gifts and graces. In my ministry experience, I have seen how leaders either give too much direction, requiring people to identically replicate their idea, or not enough direction, hoping people will figure everything out on their own and then becoming disappointed when things do not turn out the way they had envisioned. Before this project, I tended to fall in the latter category because I do not like being controlled or micro-managed and therefore often gave people too much freedom and not enough direction. I found in this process, however, a nice balance between giving appropriate guidelines for the project and making room for the Leaders to also participate in that creation process.

When we met together in our practice Gathering Group, I laid out for the Leaders the end result I wanted and some of the process. Then, I invited them into a dialogue to practice listening skills and question asking skills and to brainstorm questions to begin spiritual conversations. They could design their own “icebreaker” type of activity and use their own questions for beginning the conversations. I also invited them to be aware of where the Spirit would lead the conversations, open to many possible paths. In this way, we all learned to trust more—trust each other, trust the power of the listening process, and trust God to lead us.

Building this trust made me appreciate listening as a spiritual exercise. A mystic by nature, much of my prayer life has involved silence as I listen for God’s heart. However, in this project, I discovered the power of listening for God not just in the

silence of prayer time, but in all times and especially in the stories of others. As I became more aware of listening on that deeper level, I noticed how listening invites us to share in God's very nature by making room for others, by sacrificing our own desires and need to speak or convince or be right in order to serve others, by celebrating the diversity of creation and accepting others just the way they are, and by giving up control to allow others to participate in the process. By practicing listening in this way as a spiritual discipline, I experienced the joy of participating in God's empathetic, self-giving love and generosity.

Through listening to people's stories of being hurt by the church, I also discovered just how much I long to share God's healing and amazing love with people. In the first chapter, I described some of my personal story growing up with a developmentally disabled brother and how those experiences gave me a heart for marginalized people. However, before I conducted this project, I did not typically include in that category marginalized people outside of the church who have been hurt and condemned by religious people and religion. Hearing their stories, I felt their pain and longed to show them that God does love and accept them. My heart sang recently when speaking with a man as he described this phenomenon: "Every day I get up now and do not fear going to hell. Instead, when I put my feet on the floor, I remember that God loves me just the way I am. Because of that experience of love, I treat people differently now, not out of fear but out of love." This project provided opportunities to share that love with others.

In addition, I discovered that I enjoy not just sharing God's love myself, but also building teams and empowering others to share that love. I took great delight in watching the Leaders celebrate their own spiritual journeys and learn to appreciate and value the journeys of others. I relished the times our group of Leaders got together and shared stories of our encounters with the participants in our Gathering Groups. It reminded me of when the disciples returned from their missions and shared their stories with Jesus. Many years ago I had taken a Spiritual Gifts survey and apostle showed up as one of my gifts. Honestly, I did not see myself building new churches, so I brushed it aside. During this project, I learned how that apostolic gift played out in my ministry through developing teams of Leaders and fostering their spiritual gifts so that they, too, can participate in God's on-going mission. Together, we experienced the presence of Jesus in our midst through these various relationships.

We also learned that these relationships take time, and I discovered that I take pleasure in investing myself in relationships. I noticed that I have the patience to allow the relationships to unfold however they will, a patience not everyone in our instant gratification world has. Even our churches have often given into that immediate results temptation, looking for easy solutions to church growth instead of investing in the longer, harder process of building relationships. However, I enjoyed taking the time to listen and learn and invest my life in the lives of the Leaders as they in turn invested their lives in the lives of the participants.

Recently I shared the joy that such an investment can bring as we welcomed a couple into membership in our congregation after they made their first profession of faith.

We began socializing with this couple over six years ago when our sons became best friends in first grade. He grew up atheist and had a very cynical view of church and anything religious. She had very negative experiences as a child in a fundamentalist culture. However, we shared many common interests, so we began getting together on a frequent basis. They knew we served as pastors but it never impacted our friendship adversely. Instead, we often found ourselves relaxing on the deck of one of our homes having conversations about very spiritual topics. We never pushed or tried to convince, but merely listened and attempted to understand. After several years (yes, I mean years), they began asking us questions about our beliefs. We would share with them, careful to gauge their reaction so as not to share too much too soon. As time went on, these conversations happened more and more regularly. We shared their grief over the death of a friend and supported their cause of organ donation, providing meals and taking care of their kids when they needed time.

Over time, they became more and more receptive to following Jesus. Slowly at first, they began to get involved in church, attending worship and helping with various missions. Then, this fall, they attended our new member class, where we explored spiritual topics in a small group format. They felt relieved that others shared similar viewpoints and concerns. We dialogued together about what it means to follow Jesus and how to live as authentic Jesus-followers without showing disrespect for other paths. We shared stories about how we live our faith, and seldom did questions of “belief” or “doctrine” arise.

After the six week class, our friends tearfully informed us that they had decided that they wanted to follow Jesus and they thanked us for patiently walking the journey with them, never pushing or condemning. I had no idea how much this decision meant to them. During the joining ceremony in worship, we offered the vows free-style, following our custom at Skyline. However, I became even more aware of the language and how it has been interpreted and abused over the years by religious people wanting to exclude others. Even the confession that Jesus is Lord has become loaded with messages of intolerance at best and violent extremism at worst. So, although I typically explain what the “official language” means, this time that explanation process took on new meaning for me as I longed to help our friends understand the power of their decision without the negative undertones of churchy language.

Afterwards, as we celebrated, I reflected on six years of friendship and the joy of seeing God’s love come alive in these two people. Yet, once again, it reminded me that relationships take time and energy and a listening heart. But, the joy of sharing life with this couple and watching them grow in love for God and for the world made the cost seem insignificant. It also demonstrated, though, that the hope of my project had become alive in our friendship. Through our relationship with this couple, I had deepened my relationship with God, we had created a safe haven to explore their spirituality simply by not pushing or judging, and we had together experienced the presence of Jesus in community. So when he said: “I never thought I would say this, but I want to follow Jesus,” we thanked God for the miracle of life that we had witnessed.

The Main Course: The Project’s Impact on Skyline UMC

Recently at a Christmas concert at Skyline, I spoke with the mother of one of our guitar players who had come from out of town to hear her son play. She told me that her son had shared with her some about my project and how it excited her to hear about it. In the course of the conversation, she shared that his description of my project prompted her to reexamine her own spirituality and beliefs. As she began to listen to people outside the church describe some of their reactions to church, she became aware of their fear and attempted to affirm their feelings. She also stated that she wanted to reassure them of God's love whether they came to church or not. Her response to my project summed up the change I have witnessed in the people of Skyline UMC during the process: she took her own spirituality more seriously, she opened herself up to dialogue with others through listening, and she shifted her understanding of church from an inward to an outward focus.

In small groups and one-on-one conversations I have heard people examining their own spiritual beliefs and asking questions about why the Christian faith makes certain claims. For example, recently someone asked why Christians profess the virgin birth and the dialogue concluded with the understanding that most doctrine attempts to make theological claims instead of demanding unquestioning assent. Therefore, the virgin birth, for example, made a statement about Jesus' divinity, that somehow Jesus reflected God's life and love perfectly. We have noticed that people no longer fear questioning their beliefs, but understand that searching as part of their spiritual journey.

They have also recognized that their journey is worth sharing, so they have given more time to exploring and appreciating their own spirituality. This process has enabled

people to become more aware of others' spiritual journeys, as well. Many people in the church now see themselves as "spiritual directors" of sorts, willing to have spiritual conversations by listening with a non-judgmental attitude. Through their openness, they have created safe places for people to share their hearts and souls.

These dialogues have begun to take place in many different venues. One woman described using some of the questions we talked about to begin spiritual conversations in her workplace. She said she had noticed that people seemed to want to talk about these subjects but skirted the topics out of fear of offending others. But, when she asked her open-ended questions, such as how people practiced their spirituality, everyone felt like they could share, even if they answered that they do not practice spirituality. By giving people permission to listen, they became less defensive when hearing people outside the church talk about their religious experiences. Instead of feeling like they had to say the right thing to answer the accusations, they felt free to simply probe deeper by asking follow-up questions. This listening stance enabled people to hear other people's pain and respond empathetically instead of with hostility.

I have also observed the power of listening in conversations within our congregation. As I described in the first chapter, our church recently voted to change our mission statement to include specific groups that have felt marginalized by church. Even though we included many categories in the mission statement, the conflict centered on welcoming the LGBT community openly. To help people process through their own feelings and to enable people to hear the stories of people who have been hurt, Skyline held a dialogue session one Saturday morning. I used the people who had served as

Gathering Group Leaders to serve as facilitators for this dialogue. We focused on summarizing what we heard from the previous person before we made our own contribution to the dialogue. At the end, we invited large group sharing, but again, we asked, “What did you hear today? What did you learn? How do you view things differently as a result of the conversation?” Our facilitators helped people learn how to listen to one another, and this listening has become more part of our culture now.

I have seen this shift to listening in our new member class as well. We used to spend much of the six weeks telling people various aspects of church life. Now, we designed the process to listen more to the stories of the people joining, while still teaching about Skyline. For example, this past new member class, we began talking about the mission statement change and how it specifically invited people who had been marginalized by church: **REACH out to all people** seeking a deeper relationship with God, regardless of age, racial, ethnic or national origin, physical or mental ability, marital status, religious experience, affectional orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status, **WELCOME them** into a community of followers of Jesus who freely choose to worship, serve, and live together prayerfully and in peace following a Methodist understanding of God’s gift of grace, **EQUIP them** to live as the Holy Spirit gifts and guides, and **SEND them** to serve and reach out to all people in Christ's name. We then asked them to respond to the statement, what they thought about it and how they had seen it lived out (or not) at Skyline. One man spoke of how he found this statement included him, because he did not grow up in church and attended church for the first time at Skyline. He said he did not feel ostracized because he did not have a religious upbringing

or know all the religious jargon. Although I had been listening for the response to the LGBT issue, he woke me up to other possibilities of inclusion.

As our congregation has practiced this “ministry of listening,” both within and outside of the church, our focus has shifted outward. Our previous strategic initiatives had been inwardly focused or at least attempts to get people to come into the church. They included such initiatives as small groups, leadership training, home worship, resource management, targeting new generations to get them to come to church, etc. Our new initiatives all focused outward, using whatever resources we have to serve our community. These initiatives included creating a skate park for kids in our neighborhood who need a safe place to skate; developing a wellness center to minister to people in body, mind, and spirit; offering a tutoring and mentoring after-school ministry; and a volunteer center, where people in the community could contact someone in our church to find out how they could connect to local agencies to volunteer. Again, the mentality moved from getting people in to serving people outside the church.

In this way, our understanding of evangelism changed, too. People had always been afraid of evangelism because of the negative images of condemning people frightening others to go to church or go to hell. In fact, the Leaders cited fear of recruitment of participants as an obstacle they had to overcome. People thought of Amway or other pyramid scheme when they thought of recruitment. Yet, they also equated evangelism with recruitment to come to our church. Now, as a result of this project, people have come to view evangelism as taking the Good News wherever they go, or as being the Good News. One of my LAC members commented: “Evangelism is

such a loaded term. I used to think of it like recruitment to pull people into the structure of the church. Now I see it more as simply reaching out and spreading the Good News.”¹ They learned that they could share that Good News by listening to others and valuing their stories and their spiritual journeys. It became for us a type of “Listening Evangelism,” where we would focus on listening and allowing room for spiritual exploration as an act of spreading the Good News. Again, this type of evangelism required that people feel secure in their own spiritual journeys, that they remain open to listening and dialogue, and that they understand our goal as taking the gospel to people wherever they may be.

Room for Dessert? The Potential for Impacting the Larger Church

Although I have enjoyed observing the impact our project has had on the Leaders, the participants, the LAC, and Skyline, I often wondered if it contributed anything to the larger conversation going on in the church as a whole. During the project, people frequently commented that we were paving the way for the future of the church. As my LAC met to dialogue about using this model moving forward, we talked about the intersection of our discoveries with the conversation in the larger church. We mentioned new language possibilities for the church, a new understanding of the nature and mission of the church, and a possible model for evangelism, called, “Listening Evangelism.” If we could contribute to that dialogue, it would be icing on the cake.

¹ Reported by LAC member at May 17, 2009 meeting.

As we listened to the Leaders describe some of the conversations, we realized that we need new language. So many terms we use have become loaded with negative experiences and misunderstandings. Instead of trying to reinterpret them, we talked about forming new ways of describing spiritual experiences and church. For example, those inside the church equated the word “church” with worship, while for those outside the church the term brought to mind all of their negative experiences with church people. Similarly, evangelism and conversion have taken on negative connotations. Participants and Leaders alike heard both of these terms in negative ways, viewing evangelism as verbal violence and conversion as intolerance. The word “Christian” also brought to people’s minds images of extremists bombing abortion clinics or yelling hate-filled messages to others.

Although other words also evoked similar reactions, these three especially caused conflict. Reflecting on the possibilities, I thought of “midwifery” for “evangelism,” “community” for “church,” and “Jesus-follower” for “Christian.” For our project, evangelism did not involve telling, but listening and creating a space where people’s spirits could be reborn. Church did not mean a building but an experience of God’s presence in community. When participants asked our Leaders to share their stories, they spoke of following Jesus instead of sharing “Christian” doctrine. The common thread I discovered lies in relationships. If we in the larger church understood evangelism and church and Christianity as relationship, our words could take on new meaning.

This relational focus carried over into our conversation about the nature and mission of the church. We came to understand church not as a place but more as a

gathering of disciples wherever they may be. From the experience of the participants, we discovered an interest in small group gatherings rather than large church services. Their experience pointed to a future where the church will be about building communities of Jesus-followers in small groups or even house churches. When I spoke with other leaders in the church about this possibility, we talked about shifting the focus of the church building from a place that houses “Christian” activities to more of a community center that offers its space to other groups in an effort to serve the community and meet people’s physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The changing building use served as a symbol for the changing church mission, away from getting people in the door and toward being the presence of God for all people wherever we are.

As we discussed being God’s presence in the LAC, we talked about our shift in attitude toward evangelism. Leaders no longer understood evangelism as either a weapon or a way of getting people into the church, but instead as sharing the Good News or even being the Good News, the incarnate presence of God wherever we go. We realized that our project could serve as a model for a new form of evangelism, “Listening Evangelism,” where we demonstrate God’s presence through listening. The participants we met longed to have a safe place to share their stories and the Leaders took great delight in providing that safe haven and participating in God’s love and welcome.

We decided that the model would need to maintain maximum flexibility to allow it to be adapted to meet different circumstances. For example, I shared with the LAC the layers of belonging—Public, Social, Personal, and Intimate—from Joseph R. Myers’

book, *The Search to Belong*.² We dialogued about how the model could be adapted to fit each layer of belonging, instead of offering a one-size-fits-all approach. In the conversation, we mentioned options such as a coffee house approach that might be more public, allowing people to drop in but still have spiritual conversations, or a monthly social gathering, or the small groups like we offered, or even one-on-one conversations. Because several of the Leaders had already used the model in other settings—one used it at work with a couple of co-workers and another used it with her adult children—we knew it could be easily adapted.

We decided that the common elements would include experiential training, beginning spiritual conversations with a listening heart, and remaining open to sharing spiritual stories with others. The experiential training offered the Leaders an opportunity to explore their own faith questions while practicing their listening skills. Because they had already had the chance to share their stories and thoughts, they did not feel the need to contribute to the conversations and could focus more on listening. The Leaders also appreciated the questions we designed to begin spiritual conversations, as they demonstrated open-ended inquiry rather than leading questions with definite answers. The more questions we created, the better the Leaders became at coming up with new ones. Also, the questions came across in a non-threatening manner to the participants, allowing the conversation to go where people felt the need to talk. When the participants felt that their needs had been met, they asked the Leaders to share their own spiritual

² Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 52.

journeys. Because we had shared our spiritual stories in the practice group, the Leaders felt prepared to answer.

This process definitely required openness, but the Leaders also learned strategies to remain open to others through our training. As a result, we all discovered the presence of God in our midst. One of my LAC members stated: “Mutual healing is possible when we work up the initial courage to talk about spirituality.”³ Because I knew his story, I appreciate the irony in his statement. Three years ago, his friend invited him to come to church. Having not been raised in church, he showed no interest as he looked at her and responded politely but firmly, “No, thank you.” Soon after, however, his fiancé broke up with him and he began a period of soul searching, which included exploring his spirituality. He came to Skyline and we had many conversations in the following months. Eventually, he and his fiancé reunited, I married them, and they joined the church. Then, a little over a year ago, I invited him to serve on the LAC precisely because of his initial hesitance to come to church. Now, I felt such joy hearing him talk about the possibility of mutual healing when we open ourselves up to spiritual conversations.

As my project came to an end, I thought about the hope we had realized. I remembered a quote from William Sloane Coffin, who said: “Hope arouses, as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.”⁴ More than anything, my project brought

³ Reported by LAC member at May 17, 2009 meeting.

⁴ William Sloane Coffin, Jr., *A Passion for the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 3.

hope, to me, to my Leaders and participants, to my LAC members, and to my church.

May we never lose that “passion for the possible.”

APPENDIX A

Are you spiritual but not religious?



Are you looking for a safe, non-judgmental place to explore your spirituality without fear of being “converted”? Would you like to belong to a group with others like yourself who consider themselves spiritual but not religious? Do you have something to say to the Christian church and wish someone would listen?

We need you!

You're invited to participate in a *Gathering Group* of people exploring spiritual topics in a safe, supportive environment. The group meets once a week for 8 weeks. We'd love to hear your voice and perspective! Only you can sing the song in your heart.

Questions? Email vicgrace86@yahoo.com

APPENDIX B

Taking It to the Streets: An Invitation

You are invited! Pastor Vicki and her Local Advisory Committee (Adam Bragg, Duncan Outslay, Barbara Pope, and Doug Roof) invite you **to participate in Pastor Vicki's doctoral research project!**

Project Purpose: We will use avenues outside of the church building (homes, offices, coffeehouses, bars, etc.) to begin building authentic relationships with those outside the church. These relationships will allow us to share life together in a way that expresses our faith and provides pathways to ministry and opportunities to share the story of Jesus.

We will **create Gathering Groups** where people will be safe to explore spiritual issues without fear of judgment and examine how these spiritual topics intersect with their lives. These groups will meet for eight weeks, beginning the week of February 22. We hope to develop an outreach model to build relationships with people in a non-threatening way, listening to and learning from the critique people outside the church offer us. As the relationships develop, stories of Jesus and how our relationship with God impacts our lives will naturally arise in the course of conversation. Come, help us shape this model!

How can I help? Three options:

- 1—Pray for the project to spread God's love in Jesus to people outside the church.
- 2—Participate in a leadership team. We need 12 people to serve in four teams of three to lead Gathering Groups to host dialogue sessions with people who consider themselves

“spiritual but not religious.” We are looking for people with gifts in hospitality, facilitation, and/or compassion.

3—Help recruit participants. Do you know someone, a friend, co-worker, or family member, who considers themselves “spiritual but not religious?” Invite them to participate! You may even consider participating in the group to make your friend more at home.

What’s the time frame?

The leadership teams will meet for four weeks as a learning Gathering Group, sharing a meal, training, and an opportunity to practice creating a hospitable, inviting environment. We’ll meet from 6-8:00 p.m. on either Wednesday or Thursday evenings beginning the week of January 25. The Gathering Groups will run for eight weeks beginning the week of February 22. Then, we’ll meet no more than four additional times to evaluate.

Questions? Contact Pastor Vicki at vicgrace@gordy-stith.com.

APPENDIX C

Notes from Gathering Group Leader Training Meetings

Project Purpose: We will use avenues outside of the church building (homes, offices, coffeehouses, bars, etc.) to begin building authentic relationships with those outside the church. These relationships will allow us to share life together in a way that expresses our faith and provides pathways to ministry and opportunities to share the story of Jesus.

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Theological Assumptions:

1—God is already at work in the lives of those outside the church, loving them and drawing them into relationship. (See Acts 17:28: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being...’” and Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.”)

2—We care about people outside the religious establishment and want to learn from them. (See the Gospels, where Jesus goes to those outside the religious establishment.)

3—We want to experience what God is already at work doing in the world and join God in that work.

4—We believe God calls us into relationships instead of calling us to follow certain doctrine.

Differences between Spiritual and Religious:

1—When someone states that they are spiritual but not religious, ask: What do you mean by religious? How do you define these two terms?

2—Some said religion is “human-made” rules and ritual separate from spirituality, which is our own internal sense of God.

3—Another said that spirituality seems like a recognition of something beyond ourselves, something other that we express appreciation to or for, or that makes us experience wonder. Religion is an institution.

4—Another said we all have some sort of spirituality but not all religious. Religion is rule-based.

5—Someone else said we really need both. Spirituality can become too self-focused if it’s all about me and my beliefs. Religion is comprised of traditions (organized spiritual beliefs) that help us understand our spirituality.

6—Someone else stated that spirituality is about our own relationships, with ourselves, with others, with our world, and with God. Religion, then, is the practice of our spirituality, how we live it out. Religion is lived in our relationships.

Listening:

1—Practice storytelling as icebreakers. “Tell us a story about something that happened to you this week.” “Tell us a funny story from your childhood.” “Tell us about your experience with the divine.” “Tell us a story about your experience with the church.”

2—Create a welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere. Set ground rules for dialogue to keep conversation on track. “What would make you feel like you have been heard and respected?” Use “RESPECT” as a model for ground rules. Print them out to keep them visible to the group.

3—Practice active listening.

a—Use a talking stick to take turns talking.

b—Repeat back or paraphrase what someone said.

c—Ask follow-up questions.

d—Listen for unspoken, non-verbal communication.

e—Resist the urge to defend Christianity. Acknowledge your feelings of defensiveness and then let them go.

f—Listen for feelings and values beneath and explore those. “I see that brings up a lot of anger for you. Can you say more about where that anger comes from?” Or, “You seem really threatened by another point-of-view. What do you think that other perspective says about your identity?”

g—Assume role of investigator. We are here to discover something, not prove anything.

4—Challenges

a—Hitting hot buttons. “Can you tell us more about why this issue is so important to you?”

b—One person dominates. Summarize what you have heard them say, then state, “Let’s hear from some others.”

c—Session becomes a counseling session for one person. “I feel that this conversation is too important for the time we have here. Let’s meet together another time to talk about it.” If something tragic has happened to that person, ask how the group can help.

d—Expert or know-it-all. “Right now we are simply exploring different people’s spirituality. Let’s refrain from judging or pronouncing something right or wrong and simply listen to the various points-of-view.

Verbatim: Try as best you can to keep notes on each session. Maybe you can take turns leading with your partner, while the other person takes notes. Or, immediately following the meeting, write down as much as you can remember and compare it with your partner. Write down stories that emerge, reactions among the participants, and your own feelings/reactions.

Suggested Structure of Gathering: (be yourself here and adapt to the flow)

1—Icebreaker. People will most likely not know one another, so use a fun and playful icebreaker to build trust. You can also simply invite fun stories to help people get to know one another.

2—Conversation starters. If something does not arise naturally from the icebreakers or the group, you can use one of the following conversation starters. Be creative and go with the flow of the conversation. Any conversation can become spiritual with some intentionality.

a—What are you hoping to talk about in this group? What do you bring to the group? What do you hope to get out of it? If you could talk about anything without fear, what would it be? What are some topics that you would like to talk about but don't have a place to discuss them?

b—How do you define spirituality? How do you practice it? What do you like about your spirituality? What would you like to change or how would you like to grow?

c—What kind of community would make you want to be a part of it?

d—How would you describe God or your higher power? Describe a time when you felt God's presence. When do you feel close to God?

e—Do you have any "lower powers" in your life that you struggle with and that draw you down?

f—What about evil and suffering?

g—How do you pray? What is prayer?

h—Does heaven (an afterlife) exist? What might it be like?

i—What was the message of Jesus? What's the message you hear from the church?

j—What religious experiences have helped shape you? Did you grow up in church?

What was your image of God as a child?

k—Have you ever felt drawn out of yourself and especially connected to another

person? Have you ever felt compelled to help someone, even if it inconvenienced

you? What compelled you to do that?

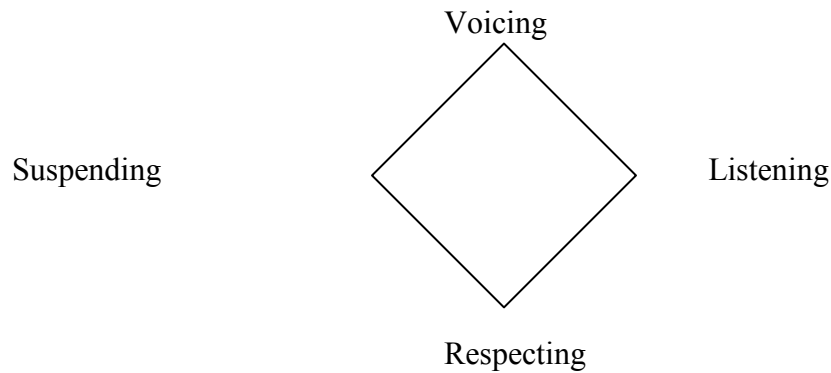
l—Describe your day in three words. Ask others what that choice of words says about

who you are.

m—Talk about current events and finding God in the midst of it.

3—Closing. When closing the Gathering, you can ask people to share what they are taking with them from this gathering, any gift that they received from the conversation. Then invite them to share any celebrations in their lives and any challenges that they face. You can close with some silence, inviting people to keep each other in their hearts during the coming week, or you can close with some sort of ritual, such as extinguishing or lighting a candle or sharing the hand of friendship.

From Isaacs: Behavior Necessary for Dialogue, p. 419



Voicing: Speak the truth for yourself, what you really feel and think.

“Asks: What needs to be said?”

Listening: Listen without resistance.

“Asks: How does this feel?”

Respecting: Be aware of another person’s position and its integrity.

“Asks: How does this fit?”

Suspending: Suspend certainty, assumptions, and judgment. (Suspend in terms of The

Fifth Discipline: Suspend in the air for all to be able to see.)

“Asks: How does this work?”

Some Sources:

Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together by William Isaacs

Discerning God’s Will Together by Danny E. Morris & Charles M. Olsen

Inclusion: Making Room for Grace by Eric H. F. Law

Difficult Conversations by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

From Morris & Olsen & Law: A Process

Framing (selecting a seed): Define the topic. (Create a safe zone by naming our fears. Define the issue from God’s perspective, asking, “What does God want?”)

Grounding (planting the seed): Define the guiding principles for dialogue. (“How will I know when I am being respected? What are my responsibilities in making the gathering respectful of everyone?” In other words, what concrete behaviors ensure that we respect ourselves, others, and the group as a whole. See RESPECT guidelines, below.)

Shedding (the seed dies and sheds its shell): Lay aside any assumptions, biases, preconceived notions, ego and predetermined conclusions in order to enter the spirit of dialogue. Ask: “What do I need to lay aside in order to fully listen for God?”

Rooting (putting down roots): Ground the dialogue in Scripture, Methodist theology and Christian tradition. For example, ask: What Biblical images come to mind? How does this fit in with our understanding of Wesleyan theology of grace and the process of salvation? How does this fit into our theological understanding of baptism and membership?

Listening (roots grow deeper): Listen for the Spirit of God in each other.

Explore (shoots sprout): What are our options for a path forward?

Improving, Weighing, Closing & Resting: Not necessary part of the process since we are not looking for a specific outcome, but rather are interested in the process of dialogue.

Questions for Developing Ground rules (adapted from Law, pp. 120-122)

- 1—Complete the following sentence: I know I am respected when...
- 2—Share your response and listen to others.
- 3—Compare the different responses. What are some reasons behind the different perceptions of respect?
- 4—What are your responsibilities for ensuring you are respected in this group? What are your responsibilities to ensure others are respected?
- 5—What do others need to know about you for you to feel included?
- 6—What steps can we take to ensure all feel heard, respected, and included?

Sample Ground Rules: RESPECT

R: Responsibility for what you say and feel without blaming others.

E: Empathetic listening.

S: Sensitive to differences in communication styles.

P: Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak.

E: Examine your own assumptions and perceptions.

C: Confidentiality.

T: Tolerate ambiguity instead of debating what is right and wrong.

APPENDIX D

Sample Questionnaire for Participants

Questions for Gathering Group Participants

1—What did you hope to gain from this experience? In what ways was that hope realized?

2—What has been your greatest experience in this Gathering?

3—What challenges did you discover? How did the group overcome these challenges?

4—How have you grown since participating in these Gatherings?

5—What made you continue to come? (Or, what made you stop participating?)
Would you like for the group to continue?

6—In what ways was this experience similar to what you think of church? In what ways was it different?

Age _____ Gender _____ Name (optional) _____

Participant Answers

1—What did you hope to gain from this experience? In what ways was that hope realized?

- ❖ Having open discussions about faith and beliefs. I realized how much I enjoy speaking with others about our spirituality.
- ❖ The opportunity to share and explore thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of others of a similar mindset; expand my mindset. This hope was realized through discussion.
- ❖ To investigate what I believe and what others believe and perhaps to clarify.
- ❖ Had no expectations, so no realizations. Was pleasantly surprised with the group.
- ❖ I hoped to gain insight on whether or not my thinking was distorted about religion. I found that I was not wrong in my beliefs, that it was okay just to believe what I believe.
- ❖ On a personal level, I wanted to be able to voice my own philosophical views in an accepting forum. Maybe I was looking for validation, or just a good debate. It has been my experience that people of strong religious belief shut down when they are faced with an opposing view. It was nice to be able to discuss and think about these topics and have intelligent discourse on them. For me to discuss topics as serious as those discussed, I needed to look within myself to examine my attitudes thoroughly. The prerequisite self-examination was good for me on a personal level. The fact that my goal was accomplished

is attributed to attitude set forth by our group leaders. They set the tone and made the discourse happen, kudos to both of them!!!! The Roofs were on fire!! (Waited six weeks to use that.)

- ❖ Communication with other free-thinking and questioning minds who like me (perhaps) want to be part of the energy and community of Christianity, only without constriction of their mental and literal autonomy. Hope was realized. Free expression by all was allowed and encouraged.
- ❖ Insight into what turns people off from organized religion. Thought this would be helpful to Carl and me for our outreach ministry. Also had a friend participating so wanted to hear from him as to his views—sometimes when someone is close to you it's hard to talk religion/spirituality with them.
- ❖ Perspective on other's views, conversation that stimulates thought. Maybe some spiritual enlightenment—and some self-enlightenment, too.

2—What has been your greatest experience in this Gathering?

- ❖ Each week was interesting and exciting. The minds and thoughts of the participants were fascinating and created evenings that ended too soon.
- ❖ The fantastic forum that enabled all of us to respectfully share our opinions and views. Opening my mind and heart to other ideas/feelings/experiences others have had with regards to religion/church.
- ❖ Sharing a spiritual concept I have found helpful with someone else who said they've now found it helpful.

- ❖ Being able to share my thoughts and feelings with the group. Before I share with the group, I look into myself to get in touch with my feelings and attitudes on the topics being discussed. In addition to being able to share, I have also enjoyed the introspection that comes with preparing for the meetings. Oh, and the apple crisps were great, too.
- ❖ My experience with this group has been extremely positive. I loved getting to know these ladies intimately. I learned to listen to others' beliefs without passing judgment.
- ❖ New friends.
- ❖ Meeting the lovely ladies I had not yet met. Finding out that there are people that also think like me and that many things said I did agree.
- ❖ Sharing thoughts, ideas, beliefs with others of a similar mindset.
- ❖ I met some really special people to share with.

3—What challenges did you discover? How did the group overcome these challenges?

- ❖ None.
- ❖ Did not discover any challenges.
- ❖ Trying to define some terms and coming to agreement on those definitions.
- ❖ Verbalizing some different thoughts. Overcame it with patience and empathy.
- ❖ The biggest challenge was scheduling our meetings. We found that we were all pretty flexible, and adjusted our meetings to accommodate our schedules.
- ❖ The biggest challenge I was prepared for was being comfortable sharing my thoughts on such a personal subject with others. Needless to say this was not a

problem for me or any other member of the group!! Again, our leaders set an environment where we all felt comfortable voicing our opinions on these delicate matters.

- ❖ Hard at times to resist one's tendency to want to dominate the conversation. We listened attentively more and resisted expressing every rising thought. Let some go.
- ❖ Personally, I realized how unfamiliar I am with other religions besides Christianity.
- ❖ Sometimes we did not agree but that was part of the magic of the conversation.

4—How have you grown since participating in these Gatherings?

- ❖ Learning even one thing makes us grow—and I have learned and thought about the spiritual and the religious and realize there is a convergence and a divergence of the two.
- ❖ I have some ideas/thoughts on how I can better communicate with those I run into who don't feel very religious or spiritual.
- ❖ Unsure. Perhaps more at ease or willing to express thoughts, ideas, or beliefs which might be off-putting or even threatening to others of different thoughts, ideas, and beliefs.
- ❖ I have grown more aware of myself and why I feel the way I do on the subject of religion and spirituality. Again, the introspection and preparation that I did

before meetings have helped me get a clearer idea of where I stand on these matters.

- ❖ I've grown in the fact that I now want to resume my search for a home church that fits me.
- ❖ I've gained 10 pounds from all the lunches! Yes, I have grown.
- ❖ I have gained a pound or two but with continued exercise I should be fine.
- ❖ I feel like it has made me realize that I need more spiritual strength.

5—What made you continue to come? (Or, what made you stop participating?) Would you like for the group to continue?

- ❖ It was a nice group to share with.
- ❖ It would be nice to continue the discussion.
- ❖ I enjoyed the company and some interesting things were said.
- ❖ I enjoyed the group.
- ❖ I walked away at the end wanting to continue to meet with these ladies. Our conversations go from one subject to another very easily.
- ❖ The accepting, open-minded attitude of the group members made me want to continue to come. I also enjoyed the subject matter discussed.
- ❖ Stimulating and cathartic and very likeable people. Great host/facilitators. I would like the group to continue. I find the discussion of religious/spiritual and related matters continually interesting and even therapeutic. Airing questions, dilemmas, somehow diffuses them, even if we don't resolve them.

❖ Loved it!! Absolutely would like for our group to continue and a BIG thank you to our gracious host and hostess who were wonderful!! I think that since we've participated it would be easier to find others to join.

❖ Definitely!!

6—In what ways was this experience similar to what you think of church? In what ways was it different?

❖ Similar to Bible study groups but with a broader view. Church allows us to grow but mostly with our reaction to what we are told without the ability to ask or comment. Church services are growth within ourselves, limited to our own perspective. That's fine, but an interchange of perspective can create a change or a deepening of one's spiritual and religious being.

❖ More dialogue—able to discuss differing views, including non Christian.

❖ Not much like church. Churches generally have a prescribed program and set of beliefs to administer, which aren't ever really discussed or questioned. I think this alienates many actively and free-thinking individuals who may want to believe (or at least participate) but have real legitimate reservations.

❖ It was in NO WAY similar to what I think of as church. I seriously doubt that any church would debate or entertain my divergent thoughts on the matters discussed. Churches are united by a common religious/spiritual theme. I can't see how group discussions like ours could come about in a forum where the group has like-minded views on religion/spirituality. Also, I feel strongly that philosophical/religious/spiritual matters are intimate. They do not need to be

shared with a large community of people. I would not be comfortable sharing my thoughts and beliefs with a church, nor do I feel comfortable listening to a large group of people share their thoughts with me.

- ❖ It was similar in the fact that we all believe in God and use prayer in our lives. It was different in that there was no pressure to change anything about ourselves, and we could come as we are.
- ❖ It wasn't at all like church. It had a divergence of beliefs, respect for the divergence, and no structure.
- ❖ Fellowship. Less formal.
- ❖ A few individuals gathered to discuss thoughts on a higher power—or lack of. Different—gathering is open discussion eliminating the dogmatic aspect of organized religion.
- ❖ It was different because it was not someone trying to convince me of their opinions if my opinions differed from theirs.

APPENDIX E

Sample Questionnaire for Group Leaders

Questions for Group Leaders

1—What did you discover about relationships with people outside the church?

How did these interactions impact your faith journey?

2—What did we learn about being church from this experience?

3—Where did you notice energy and interest from the participants? Where did you sense resistance or hostility?

4—What transformations, changes, or growth did you observe in people and in the relationships?

5—Were you able to build authentic relationships? What made them authentic?

How did you see the relationships forming?

6—In what ways were you able to share your faith?

Group Leader Answers

1—What did you discover about relationships with people outside the church? How did these interactions impact your faith journey?

- ❖ People outside the church have their own special stories and quests. People are people and we all carry some baggage. We're all products of our individual environments. I enjoyed listening to the conversations; they impacted me with their knowledge and willingness to share. My faith has been enriched by their sharing. We are all created in the image of God. Not one of us really knows who's right or who's wrong as we walk our faith journey. We all try our best. However, God has bestowed each one of us with those simple gifts. During our gatherings, many simple gifts were shared among us: courage, encouragement, compassion, friendship, courtesy, and joy. God is good!!
- ❖ Their struggles and concerns are similar to the ones I have had in the past. I understand personally their concerns and so it strengthens my faith journey and makes me want to continue this experience.
- ❖ Because I am still employed, I interact daily with peoples of all faith systems or none at all. I already enjoyed a relationship with three of the four participants; that is why I knew they were excellent candidates for these discussions. The fourth I had met on a couple of occasions, but never had any real in-depth conversations. Once again, I had to step back and say, "Whoa, BA, there are others outside the church who may have it more together than you!" Another rude awakening and lesson to shatter my strict "religious" upbringing.

- ❖ Mainly, I discovered that we all have something to say about God—how confused we are or how much we love God—or both. I also saw that a need for God came before acceptance.
- ❖ People seemed initially very willing and desiring to talk about why they don't go to church and how the church hurt them.
- ❖ I found that people are forever fascinating, both different and alike in many ways. Our group's interaction confirmed my thinking that faith—having it, searching for it, or denying having it—is a journey.
- ❖ Have always had good relationships with people outside the church, and it was nice to be able to hear beliefs expressed by several in a non-threatening environment. Other than challenging me to review and think about my beliefs and values, these interactions didn't really impact my faith journey.

2—What did we learn about being church from this experience?

- ❖ I heard the word or concept of “therapeutic” expressed more than once by the participants. There was clearly a desire to be heard by others in a safe environment, and this appeared to be “good for the soul” for several. If “church” incorporates the dogma that comes with Christian tradition, then I learned that there are at least two groups of spiritual but unchurched people—one that is not likely ever to participate actively in a “church,” and one that is willing to participate around the margins of a congregation.
- ❖ “Church” in this setting was “forum”—a place, process for the interaction of thoughts about important life topics of a spiritual nature.

- ❖ We need to get outside the walls, also need to be creative in new ways as world changes, including our use of technology.
- ❖ Church still represents two or more gathering together to acknowledge, love, and honor God, ourselves, and each other. Church IS relationship to me and can be the other way around, too—as long as God—love—and goodness are the goal.
- ❖ Just because you attend church regularly, know your Bible, volunteer your time, give your money, talk the talk, and love God and surround yourself with others who have the same beliefs/principles/ideals, does not mean you are the only one who “gets it.”
- ❖ We are a support system and willing listeners, compassionate about others’ journeys.
- ❖ I learned that those on the outside of the church are as active, or maybe more active, in their lives of caring and sharing as those within the four walls of the church.

3—Where did you notice energy and interest from the participants? Where did you sense resistance or hostility?

- ❖ Although this group represented four varied experiences and feelings, they were instantly able to find common avenues of discussion about the church. At times, they did not agree on specific definitions, but they agreed on basic comments regarding spirituality. I sensed resistance or hostility when they talked about the church’s structure and rules. These spurred a sense of negativity which then spilled over into our discussion of childhood experiences in the church.

- ❖ Energy/interest: when discussing aspects/characteristics of God (love, care, patience, etc.) Really no sense of resistance/hostility. Great discussions!!
- ❖ There were very high emotions and negativity when discussing “organized religion” and anything strictly “churchy.” Our group meshed and grew together, verifying each other’s belief systems/thoughts/creeds or modifying their own, but also holding differences of opinion and accepting that difference with respect.
- ❖ I noticed energy and interest when there was love, acceptance, and active listening available to her. Only resistance was when tired.
- ❖ Initially in wanting to talk about bad experiences and what is wrong with churches. I found resistance in trying to broaden and/or keep the conversation going.
- ❖ Everyone was open and engaged each evening. Doug facilitated but the group’s exchange of ideas often ran over him! Sometimes I sensed discussion for “conversation” sake; however, “conversion” slid into clarification before hostility appeared.
- ❖ All were interested in being heard and for the most part, in hearing others. None wanted to be told what they should think or be “sold” a set of beliefs.

4—What transformations, changes, or growth did you observe in people and in the relationships?

- ❖ This group was engaged in dialogue in the first session before we even made it out of the kitchen and into the family room. They remained engaged for six sessions and they definitely grew in respect for each other. In terms of spirituality,

I can't claim to have witnessed any changes or transformations although some of the beliefs of Buddhists that were shared by one participant seemed to intrigue at least one other participant.

- ❖ I think perspectives were exchanged and respected. At times, personal dogma relaxed and verbal acknowledgment of another's viewpoint was made.
- ❖ Can't say I really observed any.
- ❖ I sensed an effort to be more positive—live with gratitude and acceptance. I also sensed a new (rekindled) desire to find a “church” that fit her.
- ❖ I think our group was similar to begin with in their version and definitions of “organized religion.” From the first meeting, they became a unified force whether in agreement or disagreement. We were fortunate to have such an interesting and dynamic group of women. They all continually expressed appreciation for this opportunity to “tell their side of the story.” (Their words, not mine.)
- ❖ Very open to any questions; there were no topics where we all weren't willing to participate. We formed a friendship that continues. We all grew from this experience.
- ❖ From meeting one, this group's dynamics during the discussions were harmonious. There weren't any transformations or changes that were evident; however, the members of the group experienced personal growth through the open discussion and sharing. As quoted: “This isn't the kind of thing you can bring up at a cocktail party.”

5—Were you able to build authentic relationships? What made them authentic? How did you see the relationships forming?

- ❖ Authentic relationships were definitely built. This group wants to continue meeting and gathering together without an actual agenda.
- ❖ These relationships are authentic as I feel we all trust each other, share common foundational beliefs, are strong women with confidence. The relationships formed through the seriousness of the topics discussed.
- ❖ As I stated above, I already had a positive relationship with three of the participants. I admit that I could probably never be a close friend of the fourth person in our group. Our relationship would be classified as a “personality conflict” at best. Maybe because we are both controlling and think we are always right?!?! Mutual respect is what makes any relationship authentic. I believe I share that with the participants.
- ❖ I believe so—I feel that our time together offered (or created) a “safe place to be”—that’s relationship—friendship—and can go with us.
- ❖ Was not able to build these relationships.
- ❖ I definitely saw concern for each other and joy in the discovery about one another. Connections were begun.
- ❖ Good question, and I’m not sure. We established a high level of trust in this group, and it appeared that relationships built during the six weeks. But how “authentic” they are, only time will tell. I don’t think any would hesitate to

participate in a small group with the other members, but whether they will look each other up outside of this experience is questionable.

6—In what ways were you able to share your faith?

- ❖ For the most part, I did not. My sense was that, if the facilitator started to express opinions and beliefs, it might inhibit discussion or even cause some hostility. I believe that the facilitator role carries an element of authority that can be disruptive to open exchanges of opinions. Having said that, I opened up a bit in the last session and shared my thoughts on the Gospel writers and the unknowable nature of Jesus' divinity.
- ❖ I was intent on recording and spoke little—that was the plan so I was fine with that!
- ❖ Was not really able to share much about my faith.
- ❖ There was never any judgment or threat of being told I am wrong or that my feelings don't matter. My faith is my EXPERIENCE and with an environment that helps me grow in love—I can share my faith easily!!!
- ❖ I believe wholeheartedly that one can share their faith without “preaching.” I refrained from any comments during the discussion. The only thing I did was to ask questions from their comments to fully understand or dig deeper. This opportunity allowed me to grow in my faith. I have my belief system(s), but I can also allow others to have theirs! (Kinda like our community at Skyline!) Our group also has asked to meet with Judy and I to answer their questions. We'll meet with them tomorrow. I hope to make it a discussion, not a question and

answer period. A discussion where all six of us have a voice. Addendum: My sincere prayer would be to have each of our participants experience the unique “adventure” of attending a worship service at Skyline. I believe this would equate to a reversal of some of their deep-rooted resentment and beliefs about “organized religion.”

- ❖ Very openly, never felt uncomfortable. Topics such as death, love, grief, loss, addiction, family struggle, etc. Similar interest in books and movies.
- ❖ One participant said: “Although the two of you were not part of the dialogue, I definitely felt love and sensitivity flowing from you.” Now that our scheduled meetings are over, we will share in the conversations more.

APPENDIX F

Notes from the Process and LAC Meetings

1—Recruiting Gathering Group Leaders in worship: One potential leader (Tom) asked: “We’re not going to try to convert people, are we? We won’t shove faith down their throats or sell it?” My response: “No, we are simply going to listen.” Tom replied: “Good. I came to Skyline a few weeks ago as a favor to a friend in AA. I was afraid Jesus would be pushed down my throat. Instead, I found an acceptance of who I am and where I am on my spiritual journey. And, I was introduced to Jesus. Now, I believe Jesus is my higher power, not because I was forced but because I was invited.”

During that conversation I got a sense of the graciousness of God, who accepts us where we are and invites us into relationship, but doesn’t push. God also doesn’t withdraw love when we reject it, either, but continues to love and invite.

2—First Gathering Group Leader meeting: I asked why they volunteered. Some said because they were once outside the church and ached for people who remain there. Another said because her children don’t go to church anymore and she wants to understand why. Someone said because they want to become a better listener. And some said they have friends outside the church who want a place to talk spirituality.

3—April 29 Gathering Group Leader meeting: (with LAC)

- ❖ Barbara: “I had forgotten the power of story to build bonds and make us feel like we belong. Participating in this group reminded me of that power.”

- ❖ Doug and Karen: “One person in our group convinced himself to be a Jesus-follower during the course of the gatherings as he explored his understanding of and feelings about Jesus.”
- ❖ Barbara Ann and Judy: “Our group wants to meet again so that they can ask us questions about our faith.” Several others nodded in agreement. In three of the four groups, after people felt heard and respected, they wanted to hear about the faith story of the Gathering Group Leaders.
- ❖ People in each of the groups expressed gratitude for being given a voice.
- ❖ “Sometimes the things people said (like criticisms) were hard to hear. Sometimes it was hard not to defend Christianity.”
- ❖ Many of the participants have been hurt by the church or churched people. One person said: “I went to church for help, but found condemnation. I wanted to find God, but could not find God in church.”
- ❖ One participant referred to God as “the God of my understanding.” She remarked that she feels inspired to go on a search again for a Christian community where she will feel accepted. She wants to find a spiritual home and this process allowed her the freedom to question without set answers and to continue to explore her faith.
- ❖ Karen: “People have a common need to express what they feel and a need to be heard and a need for connection through dialogue. In the dialogue process, people changed.”

- ❖ Kristen: “The experience opened my mind and was both very frightening and very freeing.”
- ❖ Participants expressed lots of fear: fear of condemnation, fear of rejection, and they felt that the church set doctrines in response to fear.
- ❖ One participant stated: “I wish church would be more open-minded and let me ask questions instead of demanding a blind acceptance of faith.”
- ❖ Participant: “Any good church requires relationship and vulnerability, with the recognition that we don’t have all the answers.”
- ❖ Leader: “Church can be anywhere, anywhere we can be God’s presence and learn what people need and give them active and empathetic and non-judgmental listening. God reveals the divine self to us in a way that each of us needs. God speaks many languages of love.”
- ❖ Most of the sessions ran over time and the leaders had to cut the gatherings short.
- ❖ Participant: “Jesus is the essence of the supreme being. Jesus changed the world because of forgiveness. I have searched all over, but Christianity is my home.” This statement became a highlight for Doug because of the element of surprise. It was totally unrehearsed, with excitement over a new discovery. The participant said he felt like he was reading the Bible again with new eyes. For Doug, this really hit home because he felt like that’s where he is spiritually.
- ❖ Participant: “You’re making me think: Why am I not in a church?”

- ❖ Doug and Karen offered a Gathering Group to their kids, too. The experience drew them closer together as a family as they expressed concern for each other and grew to understand each other better.
- ❖ One participant never in church so not as open to the possibility of a spiritual side of life because she rejects God as a personal God.
- ❖ Leader: “When I was searching for a church, I had a fear of my own natural goodness. I thought the church told me I wasn’t good enough (especially Catholic Church) or that it didn’t matter what I did (a fundamentalist church). I didn’t feel like I fit anywhere. I felt like the Spirit was leading me, but the church judged that as bad. I became afraid of commitment to a church because of vulnerability and fear.”
- ❖ Leader: “A highlight was discovering that the God I love and worship is the same God as others even if they can’t name God as such.”
- ❖ Kristen: “How can I get to know these people so that my idea of God can grow more truthful through that relationship?”
- ❖ Karen: “Church gives us a particular vocabulary to name the spiritual experiences we are having. People outside the church do not have that vocabulary.”
- ❖ Barbara Ann: “God is revealed through some of these people who are “unchurched,” and I did not expect it.”

- ❖ Barbara: “I gained a deeper understanding of and appreciation for my beliefs without passing judgment on others’ different belief or non-belief. The stories enriched my life and I have greater love for other people now.”
- ❖ Participant: “Religion is for people who are afraid to go to hell. Spirituality is for those who have already been there.” People in church were unwilling to walk through her hell with her, so turned to their religion.
- ❖ Leader: “Accepting other people’s spiritual experiences validates my own.”
- ❖ Duncan: “I used to have spiritual conversations with a prior girlfriend. They were so deep and they arose organically. It was a spiritual connection I’ve never had and it made me feel so alive and really able to question everything.”

4—May 6 Gathering Group Leader Meeting: (with LAC)

- ❖ Barbara: “Gathering Groups were not like traditional church, but very comfortable. Everything was validated and valued by everyone.”
- ❖ Doug: “Gathering Groups were more like Sunday School or a small group, but not like worship.”
- ❖ What is church? (Kristen)
 - Commitment
 - Vulnerability
 - Open-minded
 - Creating safe places to explore spiritual topics and experiences and to grow spiritually
 - Relationships

- ❖ Kristen: “That’s what church is to me. God became much bigger for me through this process.”
- ❖ Doug: “These groups were not like worship, but had an exchange of ideas. It was more accountable than church. Community developed quickly through dialogue and people felt comfortable sharing personal experiences right away. We established common respect which made us feel connected.”
- ❖ Karen: “We also shared gifts. One of our members brought his guitar and we sang. I think it was about relationships and mutual respect.”
- ❖ All of them used R.E.S.P.E.C.T. as ground rules.
- ❖ Kristen: “I gained a deep and profound sense of God’s love for each of us, accepting each of us where we are.”
- ❖ Barbara: “We all created in God’s image, yet we’re all so different, whether we are just beginning to seek or are more mature in our faith. This experience deepened my relationship with God. I used to struggle with feeling worthy, but I really got the sense of God in me and God working through me, which gave me a deeper understanding of who God is.”
- ❖ Participant: “I discovered it was okay to keep questioning, that there were no ‘right’ answers. I thought the church told me not to question, but now I believe there might be a place for me in a church if I am allowed to question. I was always afraid of being ‘wrong,’ but now I feel reassured that the way I am practicing my faith is okay. Now I can look back on my life and see God at work and I realize God never left my side.”

- ❖ Leaders: They felt they were able to build authentic relationships because of the trust within the group which enabled people to be real and to share emotions.
- ❖ Kristen: “I think the relationships were authentic because the format was participatory and not “me-focused” or advocacy-based. Instead, we shared common experiences and became vulnerable to each other and in the process learned something about ourselves.”
- ❖ Doug and Karen: “We shared our faith by offering love, hospitality, and listening. People saw God in that.”
- ❖ Participant: “I discovered that my spirituality is worthy of sharing with others.”
- ❖ What did we learn about sharing our faith? It seems over time as we develop relationships and truly listen to those outside the church, they get to know and trust and love you and they want to hear what you have to say about your faith.
- ❖ An LAC member asked: “How did you gain trust so quickly?” Answers: We set up rules for dialogue and invited participation. We did not try to defend the church when it was attacked. We asked open-ended questions and we really listened and tried to understand. We demonstrated caring through our listening.
- ❖ Participant to leader: “I definitely felt love and sensitivity from you all as you listened to our stories and struggles.”

- ❖ Leader: “I became less judgmental in the process as I interacted with a diversity of people from different beliefs who ‘had it all together’ like I thought only Christians could do.”
- ❖ Kristen described the transformation of one participant: “As she shared her life experiences and saw our love through listening, she shifted from a punishment mentality of God based on performance to one of grace. She no longer asked, ‘Why does God do this to me?’ but instead she embraced the experiences as God’s gifts to her to help her grow.
- ❖ Barbara Ann: “A lot of people have been hurt by organized religion. But when they saw that Christian people really cared about what they think, it gave their spiritual journeys value. Also, because we were not dogmatic or judgmental, we developed a relationship of trust which led them to ask us questions about our faith.”
- ❖ Karen: “I think it’s easy not to think about spiritual things when not in a faith community. These groups gave people a unique opportunity and their ideas and attitudes changed as they talked with others. They were impacted by others’ beliefs and formulated their own beliefs in dialogue.”
- ❖ Doug: “We offered cold water to people in the desert and they thirsted for it.”
- ❖ Kristen: “Without God, people feel lonely but can’t even identify that need. Through these groups, they discovered that need and couldn’t get enough of the conversations.”

- ❖ Barbara Ann: “They validated each other. We often think that non-churched people don’t have anything to offer to the spiritual conversation, but we learned a lot through them.”
- ❖ LAC member, Barbara: “When we have an idea and keep it to ourselves, we are always right. But when we share it, we have to integrate others’ beliefs with our own.”
- ❖ Karen: “Where in our society do we have the place to sit and talk about deep subjects, subjects of the heart? I think this was the value of these small groups.”
- ❖ Karen: “We lived it before we facilitated it. We came up with questions and already had the opportunity to discuss it, so we’d already been heard. Then we did not feel the need to weigh in ourselves on the conversation.”
- ❖ Barbara Ann: “I was a ‘doubting Thomas.’ I was afraid of recruiting. But, God placed the names of people on my heart.”
- ❖ Fear of recruiting was a common theme.

5—Meeting with LAC May 17: What did we learn?

- ❖ Barbara: “Many people have been hurt by church. Their struggle is not with God, but with “church” or the established church. These groups seemed like a bridge to God and to the community of faith.”
- ❖ Duncan: “I was surprised how open people were and how quickly they expressed comfort and trust. Why? What contributed to that?”

- ❖ Barbara: “Maybe it was the common enemy of the church and the fact that no one defended the church. Also, dialogue engages people because no one was talking at them or to them but with them. Worship isn’t dialogue because it is one-way.”
- ❖ I commented on how people also judged the church based on their experiences with “churched” people, not necessarily with church itself.
- ❖ Doug: “If dialogue is important, how do we incorporate it into worship? How do we establish meaningful dialogue with others?”
- ❖ What happened with the Facebook group? Adam: “The internet seems to be a good forum for complaints because of anonymity. But, because of lack of face-to-face, it does not seem as conducive to opening up spiritually. There seems to be a longing for face-to-face interaction in our society, but our lifestyles cut it off.”
- ❖ Adam: “Sandra’s group may have lacked a sense of commonality of common purpose.”
- ❖ Doug: “The words that you speak are such a small portion of communication. Is that the human condition? We share an unconscious communication of much more depth through the tone of our voice, our body language, etc.”
- ❖ Fear of recruitment process: Duncan: “Barbara Ann was afraid to ask, but asked anyway and people surprised her by agreeing.” Adam: “Mutual healing is possible when we work up the initial courage to talk about spirituality.”

Doug: “Maybe moving forward, we need to have a recruiting person for each group. We also didn’t talk too much about recruiting in the training.”

- ❖ Doug: “Each group reflected the dynamics of the participants and the personality of the facilitators. We had a common purpose and similar process, but each group was free to take its own direction.”
- ❖ Duncan: “The timeline put pressure on people to recruit. When I thought of recruiting, I thought of Amway, where the risk is loss of friendships. But in this process, the recruiting and experience strengthened relationships and made workplace relationships better.”
- ❖ We had some conversation about doing these groups again. Going forward, what would be the commitment to the group? Could people drop in or would they need to be there from the very beginning? What kinds of groups would they be?
- ❖ We talked about the types of belonging in terms of layers from Myers’ book. Then we talked about how a coffee house Gathering Group could offer one layer of belonging and a small group like the ones we offered could serve a different need to belong. We would want maximum flexibility moving forward.
- ❖ Adam: “The groups were flexible where they needed to be, adaptable to changing situations but sharing a common goal.”
- ❖ Part of the problem was the word “church.” What does that mean? We talked about how for people inside the church it mostly meant the worship service

and for people outside the church it meant any negative image or experience they have ever had with organized religion or with “churched” people.

- ❖ Doug: “Was it an experience that Jesus might have had? Maybe that’s a better question than was it like church.”
- ❖ Adam: “Evangelism is also a loaded term.” Duncan: “Yeah, I used to think of evangelism like recruitment to pull people into the structure of church. Now I see it more as simply reaching out and spreading the good news.”
- ❖ Doug: “Where do the words ‘community’ and ‘worship’ fit into these conversations? In my work, there’s a real longing for community in business relationships. People want to do business as participants in a community. They want to be engaged in relationship with the people, not just as business partners.”
- ❖ What did I discover about myself? Some first musings: I love to create something that takes on a life of its own. I enjoy developing leaders and watching them grow and celebrating their successes. I don’t mind going into uncharted territory and taking a risk to find and develop relationships with people not in congregations. I am not good at “self-promotion,” but I did find other ways to promote the project, through sermons when it fit the theme, through worship movements, through congregational letters, etc.

6—May 7 Meeting with Barbara Ann’s and Judy’s Group

- ❖ This group invited me to participate in their last gathering to ask me questions as well. Their first question to me: Why did you do this project? I told them

the analogy about the blind people and the elephant. Each person describes the elephant to the best of their ability. One describes it as wispy and thin and constantly moving. Another describes it as big and round and stable. Another describes it as snake like and moving. Another describes it as smooth and coming to a point. All of them speak the “truth” about their experience with the elephant. But, none of them have the whole truth. For me, God is like that elephant. Much bigger than any of us can ever imagine. So, learning what others experience of God helps me get a more accurate image of who God is. I also told them that I believe we are each created in God’s image. So, as I learn to see that image of God in them, I come to love them more and love God more. It enriches my life and the lives of the leaders.

- ❖ Some of the things they had trouble with: individualistic view of heaven and system of reward and punishment, atonement (why did anyone have to die?), concept of Trinity (political and man-made), doctrine and Scripture also political and human, Jesus as the only way.
- ❖ One woman described her work with the developmentally disabled in Special Olympics. Barbara Ann responded by telling the story of a teenager in our church with Down Syndrome named Dian. Dian’s mother lived on the West Coast and was thrown from a horse and died. Although Dian had not lived with her, she took the news very hard. One Sunday, she cried through worship. When we got to the prayer time, Bo invited her forward to share her heart and her hurt. She did and we all prayed for her as Bo hugged her and

comforted her. One of the participants said: “Now that’s church.” Barbara Ann responded: “Yes! It’s not a place or a set pattern of prayers or doctrine. It’s an experience of God’s love in relationship.” Not a bad definition.

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